

Jan Lewis '82



Guardian

REGRETS

by Captain James T. Kirk*

The agony of my loss
Haunts me. It will all the rest of my days.
Edith, even now I can feel your softness, taste your lips.

God only knows where I got the strength to let you die.
Unquestionably we loved one another; we were so in tune.
And given that, would it have been so wrong to briefly
Reroute time? Only Spock would have known.
Doubtless, the eddy created would soon return to the main stream.
It does no good to remember. I have condemned you and myself
And I must live with that knowledge. Edith, know that
Now I would sacrifice my universe for our love.

*This poem was found among Captain Kirk's effects after his death in the Woden uprising.

Dedication

With Immense Gratitude To

Dan McCoy,

Anne Bitney,

Sandy Jacobsen

MAZELTOUGH PRESS proudly presents:

Guardian 4

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from CYNTHIA

I usually find it rather difficult to sit down in the waning moments before an issue goes to press to write an editorial because I never know what to write. This time, however, is different. I have something to discuss. Therefore, sit down, listen, and above all, please take note.

Today's topic is the contents of this zine.

As publisher of this effort, most of the mail comes to me in the nature of orders and inquiries. In more cases than could be called isolated or coincidental, the writer has asked, in one form or another, why GUARDIAN has so much Star Wars material and so little Star Trek (or vice versa, depending upon the individual's predilection).

The answer is so obvious that it seems simple-minded. We print so much Star Wars because that is what is submitted to us. We can't print what we don't receive.

One or two potential readers have asked why we don't split GUARDIAN into two separate zines to satisfy each fandom which doesn't want the other. I won't waste my time commenting on the attitude (anti-IDIC in case anybody hadn't noticed), but I will say to those few who obviously haven't tried editing/publishing a zine: we ain't got the bread nor the time to do so. This is our advocacy, not our vocation.

When Linda and I began GUARDIAN five years ago, we planned it to be Star Trek only. Granted, at the time of GUARDIAN's birth, Star Wars had not yet descended upon us, but by the time GUARDIAN One went to press, all we heard about was Star Wars, Star Wars, Star Wars. We resisted jumping on the bandwagon, owing to a confusion about Lucasfilm's policy on fan fiction as well as our commitment to Star Trek fandom.

Issue two contained a few Star Wars items since clarification had been received; however, the Star Wars material only comprised about 25% of the zine. Star Trek still prevailed.

We then came to issue three. The split was 50/50.

You hold issue four in your hands. The pendulum has definitely swung in favor of George's children. Not much of Gene's.

from LINDA

It seems like we just finished printing our third issue, yet here I am writing the editorial for our fourth! Where has the time gone?

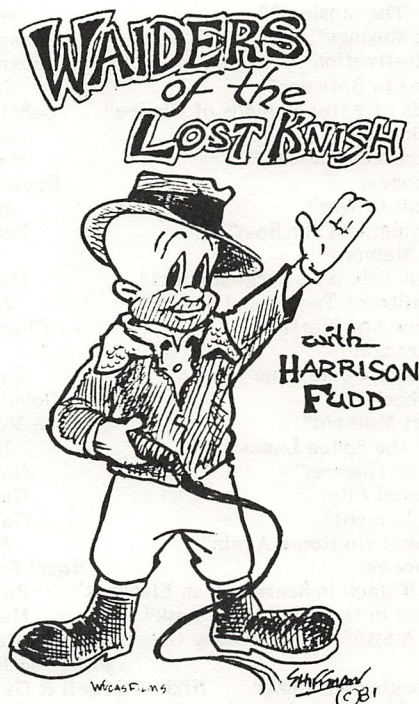
This issue, as you may have gathered, consists predominately of Star Wars stories, but scattered amongst them you'll find some Star Trek and Raiders of the Lost Ark material. I hope you will like the material we've selected for this issue, and I guess Cynthia's editorial

All of which brings me back to the whole point of my rambling: if you readers want more Star Trek material, WRITE IT! As I said before, we can't print it if we don't got it.

I again want to thank our contributors and readers for their continued support during the past year. It is most gratifying to know that our efforts are appreciated.

I would also like to extend my personal thanks to two of the people to whom this issue has been dedicated: to Sandy, for introducing me to "Toy", and to Anne, for keeping the potential war between "Toy" and me down to minor skirmishes.

And to Linda, who has emerged undaunted, albeit a bit scarred, from being on the sidelines of those battles.



about sums up my own feelings as to the contents of future issues.

A few notes about some of the material herein. "TESB: The Musical" is the result of my 1979 Christmas/New Year's visit to Cynthia in Minneapolis. A bunch of us (who shall remain nameless in order to remain healthy) got together late at night and started filking. After we'd done two or three songs (without

changing any lyrics), it dawned on us that with just minor changes, we could adapt the songs to "The Empire Strikes Back". Then asked each other if there would be a riot if we performed it at MediaWest*Con. Actually, we thought there might — with us as victims — but being brave souls, we decided to do it anyway. To our surprise, TESB:TM was very well received, and we decided to torment— er, delight our readers by printing it here.

"Three Women in Search of an Elephant" is the result of Paula Block's, Pat Gonzales', and Karen River's trip to New York to see The Elephant Man. It wasn't funny at the time.

And I want to thank Howie Weinstein and Roberta Rogow for allowing me to print "Escape From Cancellation" and "Starseeker", respectively. At the 1981 August Party, the con committee held a contest. Members of the con were supposed to write an opening line or a one-line story idea. Five fan authors, chosen in advance, then picked from the ubiquitous hat and chose one entry apiece. They then had to write a story (or poem, obviously) based on the sentence they had chosen. After Howie had read his, I immediately collared him and asked him if I could print it, and Roberta offered her poem. It was an interesting experiment, and we're delighted to be able to offer some of the results in this issue.

We were tempted to nickname this issue The Marcia Brin Anthology Issue because of the number of stories Marcia has contributed to it. Then I realized the number of filksongs Pat Gonzales and Jani Hicks have in this issue and was tempted to call it the Guardian Filk Book, or the Karen River Sketch Book for the amount of work I badgered— er, encouraged her to do for us. Susan Matthews' "A Jedi Craves Not" is the longest story in the zine, and Anne Zeek wants me to make it perfectly clear that her story in this issue, "The Lesson," is not connected with any of her other stories. For me, however, the most intriguing story is "Tales of the Lost Ark" by Jean Stevenson because of the interesting challenges it presented. In it, you will find a mock Newsweek article. I had to find the proper type, determine the size, and lay it out once I had the type-setting at hand. (And I would like to take this opportunity to thank Luna Publications for typesetting the article for me.) Then I had to match available letterpress styles to that which Newsweek uses. (By the way, Jean also works at CBS News, and in the same story, you'll find a mock transcript of a CBS EVENING NEWS WITH DAN RATHER. That's an in joke, because I type MORNING transcripts in the department that also does EVENING NEWS.)

Which brings me to the dedication. I changed jobs (still at CBS, though) last June, and now use a Wang word processor. It was my new boss, Dan McCoy, who allowed me to type the zine during my spare time and off hours. It should be noted that even though the zine is approximately the same size as the last issue, thanks to the proportional spacing we've actually fit more material in the same amount of space!

Anyway, we hope you like the results of our efforts. I want to thank all of our writers, artists, proofreaders, and particularly Susan Bridges, who not only proofread everything as it came off the machine, but who came up to my office and helped babysit the printer as it printed out the pages. (Otherwise, I don't think my nerves would

have stood the strain. It's one thing to input the material; watching it print was a whole 'nother matter. Did I count the lines correctly? Are the columns even? Did we catch all the typos?) And Regina Gottesman, just for being a close friend — and for kindly printing out all the italics you see herein when we discovered my machine couldn't use her print wheel.

Once again I'm excluding a zine listing. I've taken on the task of typing Universal Translator, and I'm zined out. But, as has become customary, I am listing the three buying guide zines that are probably the most comprehensive lists of everything that's available:

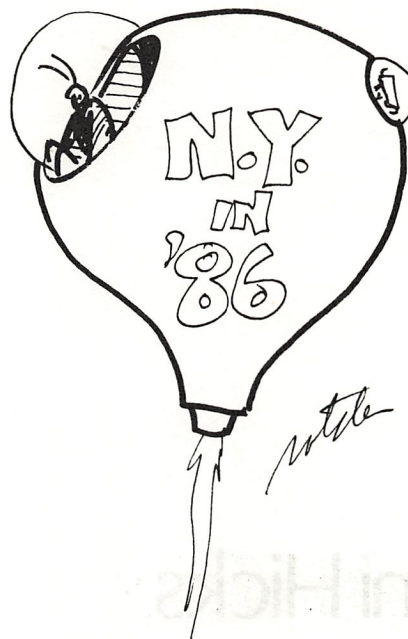
Jundland Wastes. Star Wars. \$2.00 an issue, or 3/\$6.00 payable to Pat Nussman. Order from Pat Nussman; 113 Washington Street; Williamsburg, VA 23185.

Universal Translator. Various universes. \$1.75 an issue, 4/\$6.75; published quarterly. Make checks payable to Kookaburra Press. Order from Susan Bridges; 200 West 79th Street; New York, NY 10024.

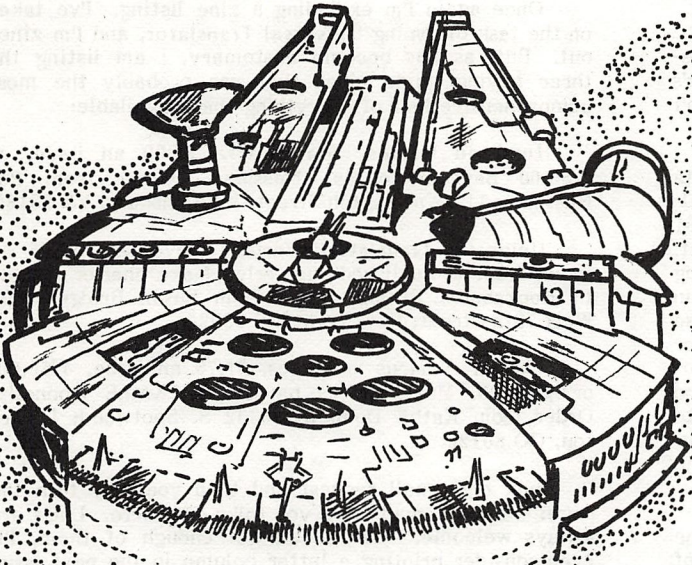
Forum. Various universes. \$1.75 an issue, 4/\$6.00, or 9/\$10.00. Make checks payable to KathE Donnelly. Order from KathE Donnelly; 6302 S. Spotwood; Littleton, CO 80120.

Just one small request and then you may turn the page: we need input from you folks out there. LoCs are always welcome. And, if we get enough of them, I'll even consider printing a letter column in the next issue (that's called a bribe, folks).

Happy trails.



THE FALCON



(to "Calypso" by John Denver)

To ride through the void of an ebony starfield
To weather the worst of Imperial fire;
To savor a zest for life and for living,
Not to be simply a smuggler for hire.
The blast of the turrets, the sound of the engines,
The absolute freedom you have in your hands:

Aye, the Falcon, the planets you've been to,
The things that you've seen and the things you could tell!
Aye, the Falcon, we'll drink to your captain,
The man who has served you so long and so well.

With the Wookiee beside him, no starmap to guide him,
Relies on his instincts to show him the way;
And as he runs roughshod through this silent world
Deep in his heart he can see a new day.
With no one to hold him to rules or to boundaries
The galaxy's wonders are at his command:

Aye, the Falcon, the planets you've been to,
The things that you've seen and the things you could tell!
Aye, the Falcon, we'll drink to your captain,
The man who has served you so long and so well.

Aye, the Falcon, the planets you've been to,
The things that you've seen and the things you could tell!
Aye, the Falcon, we'll sing to Chewbacca,
The Wookiee who's served you so long and so well.

Jani Hicks

TALES OF THE LOST ARK

JEAN L. STEVENSON*

In my little town
I grew up believin'
God keeps his eye on us all;
And he used to lean
Upon me as I pledged
Allegiance to the wall.

Paul Simon

EVER AFTER

"We never seem to get a break, do we?"**
Marion Ravenwood

The torch in the young man's hand flickered and nearly went out as a huge block slammed into place where there had once been an opening in the wall. He cried out. Futile.

Miriam stood silent, remembering only the ugly voice of her torturer, the laugh that seemed still to echo around her. Her captors had hurt her before, and she had known that the pain below her belly meant death sooner

*special thanks to A.E. Zeek, M. Corbett, P. Barilla for their service as all-night sounding boards.

**all sub-title quotations are from Raiders of the Lost Ark, story by George Lucas and Philip Kaufman, screenplay by Lawrence Kasdan.

news reports by JUANITA SALICRUP

than she had thought possible for one her age, only recently grown to womanhood. But when he had tired of her, the man who had walled them here — priest of an untrue worship — had broken her heart. "Your father died violating the temple. Your god destroyed him."

It couldn't be true. Her father served the priests with joy, and his prayers protected all his family. She was sure. She was. But the temple had been violated. She knew. She had seen the frightened slaves carrying the sacred vessel — at least it was decently covered — all the way from Jerusalem; and rumors among the other slaves in this too-new city said that it had been hidden somewhere in this complex of tombs. Tombs. The graves of kings lay here, they said. And now, too, would Miriam.

The light whirled fiercely as the man turned in a circle, peering into all corners with the torch held high and one hand poised on the whip coiled at his waist. His golden gaze came back to her, blazing in anger. Fearfully, she measured the promise of strength in his huge frame. He spoke, but the accent was strange and she didn't understand enough of the words. He stepped closer, took her chin in one calloused palm and turned her face this way and that. Then his strange eyes traveled the rest of her body, interest lighting and fading again as he glanced beyond her, to one side and then the other. Now she could see the torch tremble, and the robes over his chest flutter with the beat of his heart.

His people feared the dead. And he stood in a tomb.

"What is your name?"

She looked up, startled. So he had known someone of her people. "I am Miriam, daughter to Aaron of the tribe

of Levi."

"And why did Rahotep throw you here...with me?"

She shook her head, unsure of how to answer. "He had used me. Then the guards...also....He thought that a child of my body would be a key to—"

"To your god," he finished for her, laughing harshly. "Can your god free us from here?"

"I do not know."

"Then what good is he?"

She straightened, though pain stirred in her. "Can your gods free us?"

"I serve only Shishak," he said quickly. "I serve my pharaoh and my brother. I designed Tanis to his glory, built the city in the years of his wanderings, and gave into his own hands the key to this place." He strode rapidly from one great statue to another, the torch casting his shadow to all corners. "Rahotep will have killed the workers, but Shishak could find us...if he were here.... Then I would not be about to die here...alone."

"I am here."

"You are. Will you comfort me?" It was said with an edge of malice and more, of fear.

"I do not think...that my body—" Something else had torn within her when they had thrown her into this sand-floored place with tall shadows and the pictures of her captors etched into the walls. She could feel blood seeping into her skirts now.

Swiftly, he moved toward her and put an arm around her shoulders. "Here. Hold the torch."

It took both her hands to steady the staff as he gently lifted her into his warm arms. And a whispering sound — not quite of water, nor yet of voices — crept into the chamber. He whirled, cursing in his language, and in the far shadows, she could see the undulating slickness of Man's oldest enemy. The chest against which she lay rose in a sob.

"Asps. They will feed on us."

"But we won't know it."

"You are hurt." He turned and strode toward the canopied altar. "Perhaps your god will help you after all."

"What?"

He nodded toward the stone cairn. "Inside there is the temple vessel of your people. Perhaps I can open it—"

"No!" She moved convulsively in spite of the pain it brought, and he looked down at her in question. "No one is allowed to touch or to look upon the place of the covenant, or they die. No nearer. Take me no nearer."

He looked to the stone altar and back to her before setting her down on the steps and mounting them. "I do not believe in your god. He cannot kill me." But he only leaned over one side of the crypt, his arms braced on the top.

Silence held around them but for the sliding of the serpents and the guttering sound of the light in her hands.

"The torch is going out."

He turned to her. "Yes. You see? I am alive."

"Now." A new wave of pain swept over her, her woman's body reacting to the full moon rising above the desert, above their tomb.

"How are you hurt?" He was sitting beside her, the torch in his hands now.

She clutched her body. "They tore my womb."

"Ah!" Horror spoke to her. "I had a sister who died so."

She nodded, and once more the silence grew.

"Gods!" he cried loudly, and the sound echoed. Bounding to his feet, he raised the torch high. "Gods! Leave me not alone!"

A tiny smile curved the corners of her mouth to hear him, such a man-child that in his fear he forgot her. All of them had forgotten her, had left her behind tending her brother as the enemy marched through the village. She had said to herself that they would not kill her, not insignificant, unbeautiful Miriam. Well, they had. Slowly, quickly, they had.

"I am here."

"You are here." He dropped to his knees on the sand before her and stabbed the torch to an upright position beside them. "Miriam, daughter of Aaron of the tribe of Levi, will you be my companion? Will you travel across the river with me so that I may not be alone in the otherworld?"

He reached one of those big hands toward her, and she placed her own within it, wincing as he closed his fingers over it. Quickly, he loosened his hold. "And I have heard that some believe...perhaps we will be together in some other time, more happily. Oh, don't leave me to die alone!"

"Have you heard that truly?" she asked hesitantly. "That death means only a space between living? And do you believe...?"

He nodded and then looked away. "I did not. Yet I do. I shouldn't ask it of you. Perhaps your god—"

"I think that there is nothing our priests have said which would...deny such a thing. I do not know. I am only a woman."

"But a man may take his wife with him wherever he goes."

"I am not—"

"I will believe in your god," he said quickly, "if you will say to me, 'Imram, I am your wife.'"

The pain forced a moan from her. When she could think again, they sat in darkness and his arms were warm about her, his hand gently stroking her forehead. She felt a coolness slide over her foot; and he stiffened for a



moment as the serpent struck.

"Imram," she whispered.

"Miriam?"

"I am your wife."

His arms tightened and she could feel the pain of the poison enter him. His whisper just disturbed her hair. "Sweet life."

"And I believe. We shall be happy."

♀

When at last breath ceased, even the asps were silent; but in the long night a wind and fire filled the chamber, consuming that which lay before the altar, leaving the rest undisturbed.

And no serpent ate of the flesh of the lovers.

THE WEDDING ALBUM

"Your appearance is exactly as I imagined."
Katanga

The woman was a stranger: feet clad in not-very-sensible heeled pumps, slender legs sheathed in the finest French silk, exquisitely designed skirt and jacket of navy linen that matched shoes, hat and the purse clutched tight by a white-gloved hand. The snowy silk of her blouse had tiny red cherries splashed over it, the color echoed by a scarlet kerchief peeking from her breast pocket and by the two berries nestling against the gros-grain silk ribbing her hatbrim. She looked stylish, poised and completely at home; but the inner woman, longing for the freedom, the unfettered existence of another life, another time, did not match the image.

Marion Ravenwood — Jones, she reminded herself firmly — stared at the woman in the mirror and laughed harshly, twisting her generous mouth into grotesquerie. It was the cherries that did it, she decided finally. No wonder Indy's face had gone strange when he first saw the hat. After years in a bar in Nepal, days in Cairo, and a night in the captain's cabin of a tramp steamer in the Mediterranean — not to mention the unfathomable/best-forgotten horrors of a strange and barren Greek island — wax cherries with a discreet green leaf on the far end of the stem seemed more than incongruous.

Nevertheless, Marion turned away from the hall mirror and, after checking the contents of her purse for a white cardboard square, let herself out of the red brick, bachelor type, faculty house. She kicked her way through the multi-hued leaves on the walk and when she reached the downhill neighbor's neatly manicured territory, lengthened her stride to a graceful, distance-eating pace learned from Sherpa guides.

But inside her purse, the gold-edged invitation sent out vibrant reminders of its presence and her purpose to dry her throat. Inevitably, she thought of Indy's reaction yesterday afternoon.

"Damn!"

"Don't swear at me! I never pretended to be a cook!" She looked up from her plate, but he was steadily spooning up what she privately called an 'archaeologist's dig'. "What's wrong?"

He had been sorting the mail, and now he scowled fiercely through reading glasses at a white square of paper. Indiana Jones, archaeologist, professor, doctor of philosophy, lover, husband...but always archaeologist, looked remarkably tame sitting in a small, civilized dining room. His sun-bleached hair had returned to its normal light chestnut, and with the bullwhip consigned to the closet, his clean shaved, tough-guy jaw rarely took on a battle tautness in the realm of academia. But the mobile mouth tightened perceptibly as he handed the envelope to her.

"This is for you. Sorry I opened it. I didn't expect—"

"Well, nobody knows me here. Why should you expect me to get mail? What is it?"

The envelope: 'Mrs. Indiana Jones.' Marion grumbled inside. Didn't she have a name of her own anymore?

The enclosure: 'President and Mrs. Randolph Parnell cordially invite you to join them for tea.' Tomorrow afternoon. Indy had a class then, which the sender had to know. 'Repondez s'il vous plait.' College stationery.

"Will you go?"

"Why not?"

"Well, I thought...I mean, I'm not invited."

"So? Randolph Parnell's not going to be there. It'll be all women. You wouldn't like it anyway."

"But those women...they're vultures, she-cats..." He squirmed, and her eyes narrowed.

"What's the matter, Jones? Afraid somebody's gonna give away your mating habits? Don't worry. They can't surprise me."

A dull red crept over his cheekbones, and the color of his eyes shifted through green and blue to a shadow grey.

Suddenly, she was furious. "But that's not it, is it? You don't trust me!"

She had stormed into the kitchen, looked at the clock, realized they had no time for a good rousing argument. Indy was on his feet looking after her uncertainly, and relief flooded his face to see her return. Before she could say anything, though, Marcus Brody from the museum knocked on the front door, gave Marion a distracted greeting, and dragged Indy off toward the campus. The ensuing hours had been strained.

Now here she was having a pleasant afternoon's walk spoiled by the prospect of the society she would meet at the end.

It was strange to be in America, in a college town where small houses sat precisely centered on postage stamp lawns bordered by trees that put Kilmer to shame. And on campus, the brick-and-white beautiful college buildings gave a subtle call to memory, recreating a sense of exotica that had filled with mystery a

childhood spent playing among the pyramids and sand-castle towns of modern Egypt, the sun-whitened glory of all that remained of ancient Greece and Rome, the age-greened temples of the Yucatan.

Stranger still to contemplate dealing with American women who cleaned and cooked and loved in these neat pillboxes while their husbands fought the jungle beasts of ignorance, disinterest and negligence.

Marion frowned and clutched her purse more securely. Her father had spoken those very words, shouted them, cursed his students with them. And her mother would put gentle hands on his shoulders. After a while then, they would all three head off on another search for the wonderful treasure of the past which would for all time set her father's name in the history of the profession, of the race.

No wonder she had loved Indiana Jones...even as a child.

She stopped abruptly and glared at the figures hurrying around her in the main quadrangle of Marshall College.

Among the Nepalese and, earlier, the Arabs and many other cultures in the world, she had seen girls, younger than fifteen, married and with children. With her mother dead and the subliminal tension of that dangerous thing she could recognize only now that had begun to grow in her father for her, it had been a godsend — she thought of the Ark and shivered — when the painfully eager doctoral candidate had appeared in their lives.

"This one, Mari, honey.... Oh, for him I would willingly give up the search and teach forever in stale classrooms. He makes the teaching worth it. Why, do you know, he agrees with me on the probable location of Tanis!"

As he continued, Abner Ravenwood would put a hand on her head and gaze at her as though he saw her mother. And Marion, bursting with love for her bereft father and for the younger man who had given him new life, was drawn, oh, so willingly, into the arms of Indiana Jones.

But not in America. Not with a fifteen year old 'girl'.

She remembered the fury of that last meeting between teacher and student. Abner Ravenwood had seemed like a priest of the past he loved, thundering his anger through the skies. Indy — her big, strong, beautiful love — had cowered and gone away.

Her eyes widened: with no memory of having moved, she found herself on the wide front veranda of a large, American colonial style home.

No wonder she had thought she hated Indy! He had refused to fight for her, to steal her away. And she had reacted like the wild thing she was. Then.

In the ten years since, she had learned more about men, about her father, and about Indiana Jones — who had at last come back, had fought all the demons of the world for her, had kissed her with love in his eyes.

And now Marion Ravenwood Jones faced a tea party, the kind of politely dull function her mother had once dragged her to and then ended up storming away from for

some reason Marion had never understood. Would these women understand that a fifteen year old could love forever?

"Oh, hello! Aren't you Dr. Jones' wife?"

She turned. Two women climbed the steps to join her before the immaculately white door. The older one bustled forward to lift the knocker. The speaker, a beautiful young thing of golden hair and blue eyes in a matching cornflower garden frock, smiled and blushed as Marion's gaze fell to the oversize album in the girl's hands.

"Hello. Yes, I'm Marion...Jones. And you are...?"

"I'm Dr. George Parrish's wife. But my name is Amelia. And this is—"

"Mrs. Flora Thrift. Good afternoon, Andrew. You had best study harder if you want to pass that literature course." This to the young man who opened the door. He stared at Mrs. Thrift in dismay and then stood aside so they could enter. She continued, "My husband is Dean of the College and tells me of so many of the problems our young people face. He's very concerned." She turned to Marion with a faintly accusing expression. "We had hoped to be last to arrive."

"If only I'd known," Mrs. Dr. Jones murmured, adding to herself, I'd have waited another five minutes.

"Well, it can't be helped. Come, Melie."

Like the Parrish wife, Marion meekly followed the boy and the older woman out of the spacious foyer, through a close little passage beneath the grand staircase and into a glass-walled conservatory where they were met by the sight and sound of some thirty women in flower-bright costumes draped over garden chairs and lounges.

"Flora! Welcome, dear, welcome. I was just asking Merebeth if you had taken ill. We would have missed you. Yes, I've met Mrs. Parrish. Welcome to— Oh! Excuse me!"

To Marion standing in the doorway, it seemed as if a hurricane of pastel-hued chiffon moved inexorably upon her. Finally, though, the whirlwind steadied into bright green eyes in an age-lined face and a proffered hand with a grip a Sherpa would be proud of.

"You must be Mrs. Jones. I'm Alexandra Parnell. Welcome to Marshall College and to our home. I've been looking forward to meeting you."

"Thank you. Please call me Marion."

"Oh, indeed." Flora Thrift had followed her hostess with the Parrish girl in tow. "We have all been dying to see the woman who could hold Indiana Jones' attention for more than a few weeks."

Marion thought longingly of a stiff shot of the Belloq family liqueur.

"Marion. Amelia. Why don't you join the others and help yourselves to refreshments? Oh, Flora, would you assist me here for a moment?" Mrs. Parnell drew the Thrift female to one side and waved the two younger women away.



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With a shake of her head — reminder of the cherries on her hat — Marion forced herself to walk casually toward the tea tray. Amelia Parrish obviously knew several of the other ladies present; Marion nodded to those who caught her eye. And moments later, the wife of the dean and the wife of the president followed with sunny smiles for all.

When it came to negotiating a plate loaded with tiny cheese and meat spread sandwiches and a cup of unexciting American tea, Marion stripped off the confining white gloves and stuffed them in her purse. Then she found herself a seat just far enough from her nearest neighbors to make polite conversation difficult. But too soon a shadow fell across her, and she looked up into Amelia Parrish's anxiously pleading face.

"May I join you? I—"

The blue and gold girl was maintaining her deathgrip on that huge book and consequently had to struggle to balance a sandwich- and cup-bearing plate. With a sigh Marion moved aside to give the other room on the bench. With painful slowness Amelia Parrish seated herself, settled the book in her lap and sighed her plate to a secure position on top of it.

"I understand we share a social position, Mrs. Jones."

"Marion. We do?"

Yes. I got married just a few weeks ago, too."

"Well, isn't that nice."

"Oh, it was, and very romantic. I met George at the Choralier Society holiday concert last winter and he just...swept me off my feet."

"Ten months later." Might have known. She and Indy had taken...what? A few days?

"...and Mrs. Thrift has been so kind in helping me to learn about academic life."

"That sounds like something she'd do."

Parrish turned a disconcerted gaze on her, then recovered. "I'm sorry. I'm talking too much about myself. My mother says I shouldn't."

"I don't know. Nobody else will speak for you."

Silence rang in the conservatory. Marion cast a swift glance at the expectant faces near her and was reminded of the intent, shackled look of gossiping native wives. As if at a signal, the patter of bright voices resumed.

"I don't like to listen to rumors," said Parrish with a defiance that amounted to full-fledged rebellion. "So I've decided to ask you."

"Oh?" The lukewarm brown liquid in Marion's cup got worse with each sip.

"Yes. You see, it was so mysterious...Dr. Jones going off the way he did. Of course, Dr. Brody substituted marvelously, I'm told. But George says your husband has never brought back a wife before from the strange places he goes."

"I should hope not."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I've offended you."

"Not exactly, but I'll give you some advice. Just ask your questions and don't worry. I'll decide if I want to answer them or hit you."

Mrs. Dr. Parrish's teacup hit her plate with a clink that sounded like a gunshot in the conservatory. Marion looked up to meet Mrs. Flora Thrift's goggle-eyed gaze, and her mouth tightened. Mrs. Randolph Parnell wore a faint frown as she watched her guests. Finally, Marion relented.

"What is that tome you're hauling around? Are you taking a class?"

"Oh, no!" Mrs. Parrish squealed. "I wouldn't dare—!"

"Wouldn't dare what?" Marion asked as the other gasped in apparent horror/dismay. "Take a class? Why not?"

"Well, Doctor— George likes me to be at home most days."

"You're not home now," Marion pointed out. "And how much time would a class take? Maybe a couple of hours two days a week?"

"Yes, but—"

"I'm hoping to get into some courses myself, and—"

"Dr. Jones will allow you to do this?"

The heavily accented words came from someone on her other side. Marion looked for the speaker and met a dulled, belligerent gaze in a face that seemed frozen to one glum expression.

"It was his suggestion. You see, for the last few years I've been rather sequestered, and I need to catch up on what's happening in the world. I've been reading all the newspapers and reports I can lay my hands on, but Indy thought—"

"My husband would never ever—!"

A clamor of tongues interrupted, their tone taking from the first — although Mrs. Parnell sat silent. Marion let the sound wash over her, remembering Indy's attempt to reply to her question about the Germans with Rene Belloq in Egypt. But she had not really been cognizant of world affairs before Abner took her to Nepal, and a verbal explanation of the rise of the Nationalist Party in Germany, with its fuhrer and its growing entourage of horrors, was simply beyond him. That was when he had recommended the newspapers and a course from one of the social science professors at Marshall College.

"George says there's going to be another war."

Amelia Parrish's quiet school-child voice silence them all, and with her first stirrings of respect for Dr. Parrish, Marion looked at the young bride, her own stomach churning with recent memories of pain and terror.

"With the Nazis?"

"No, no, no, no, no!" Flora Thrift bounced to her feet

angrily. "This is a completely inaccurate reading of the German people and their government's intentions. No, Alexandra — give me leave to speak with the words of one who knows. You are all aware that my dearest friend, Caroline Kirkwood, was in Europe just this past summer and they went to the Olympic Games in Berlin. Germany has prospered greatly under the Nationalists. They do not seek war. Not at all. However, it is the foolishness of just such thinking from the British and Americans that will cause a war. And Germany will, of course, have to defend herself."

Marion winced as a sharp pain lanced from her fingers along her arm and through her body. She looked down and concentrated on releasing the tight grip her fingers had taken on her purse. No one else had spoken. "I understand from my reading that some people in Germany have not prospered greatly at all under the Third Reich."

Thrift's massive brow wrinkled. "Who?"

"At those very same Olympic Games your friend attended, an American athlete was rudely dealt with."

"Oh, you mean Owens. Well, after all..." The wife of the dean let her voice trail off with an eloquent shrug. "But I can assure you that Caroline said she saw none of those ugly signs that some would have us believe are in the store windows. And she even went to several gala events where there were, in fact, Jewish persons."

"Perhaps she attended the opening of Buchenwald, for example?" Marion replied, meaningfully.

"No, she didn't!" snapped Mrs. Thrift, glaring at her.

At that point, Alexandra Parnell's tough-soft voice carried through the group. "Amelia, dear, I think you were going to show us your book? What is it?"

Parrish smiled hesitantly and blushed as all eyes came to her. "It's a collection of photographs from the first time George and I met, all the way through our courtship and finally the wedding."

Appalled, Marion just gaped at her while murmurings of approval surrounded them and some of the women closest to them inched their chairs nearer. Others rose to gather around, hemming Marion in place, bending over Amelia Parrish's shoulder, clucking softly to one another as the girl put her plate to one side and opened the white leather album to the first page.

"This is the program from that first concert," she began, "and the article that was in the newspaper."

Oohs and ahs. Marion folded her hands in her lap and stared at them. Perhaps Indy was right and it was just because she had learned all these things 'overnight' that the situation in Europe frightened her so. Then, too, as he reasonably pointed out, her own treatment at the hands of some Nazis had been less than gentle. She smiled with satisfaction at the thought of one particular German with bandages all over his head and his arm in a sling. After that, none of them had touched her.

"My, you are looking sly," Flora Thrift interrupted Marion's thoughts. She looked up into a gimlet-eyed attack. "When did you first meet Dr. Jones?"

"Ten years ago," Marion faltered. Then she drew

herself up. "He studied with my father at the University of Chicago."

"Oh."

First meeting: Indiana Jones following Abner up the steps to the house where she sat on the porch with a nervous boy she had met the first day of school. For long after she had wondered at the gold that flared in Indy's eyes and flamed in her heart. Bobby Smith had gone away unnoticed.

"Oh, how pretty! When was this Amelia?"

With a start, Marion focused on the bride's book again.

"George took me ice skating last February, and here— oh, the page is stuck. I have to be careful. This was a spring picnic the church held. And this is the Marshall College Debating Society leaving for the Regional Forensic Championships at Harvard. I went to the campus to see them off."

An ordinary courtship. A courtship, period. And Marion presumed it was normal from the tone of the women around her as they applauded the pretty pictures. She looked away, unable to escape the memories of corresponding moments in her relationship with Indy. Shivering in the ice-tipped Nepalese night, her feet freezing as her nest, her safe place, burned to the ground, she had clutched the ancient bronze piece that had brought him back into her life. The brightly striped tent of the church picnic reminded her of the bazaar in Cairo, and the monkey, and dark places and terror, and Rene, and Indy leaving her once more. She had always had to fight for herself. You could never depend on Indiana Jones to do the chivalrous thing. On the other hand, they had come out of it alive.

She shook her head and met Alexandra Parnell's measuring gaze where it seemed that concern had begun to grow.

Cooing sighs interrupted the silent exchange, and Marion turned to Mrs. Parrish. What now? A proposal dinner. A proposal dinner? If anyone had proposed, she had. Come to think of it, it was the first time Indy had rescued her. The natives working at her father's digs had always left her alone until that time in her fifteenth year. Then a big brute who was shunned by his own people — although her father, of course, hadn't known any better than to hire him — tried to catch her away from the others. But Indy had come with his bullwhip, and the civilized, well-brought-up young man from the American Midwest had abruptly metamorphosed into the Indy of today.

¶

"Marion, are you all right?"

Staring at the beaten form of the worker, she gasped painfully for breath, torn between tears and a consuming, aching desire to touch Indiana Jones, just touch him...and take away the long echo of fears that had frozen her at the first touch of the native's hands.

"Indy...?"

"Marion!" Her father was there, and he held her and covered her and led her away, awkwardly asking was she okay, was she hurt.

Then she understood and stepped out of his arms at the entrance to her own tent. "He didn't hurt me, Abner. Indy stopped him."

"Good, honey. I'm glad he's here. Kind of like a brother, isn't it?"

"Yes. So I am glad."

Her father, looking self-conscious, went back to talk to Indy. She saw them together as she went to the river to wash and change clothes. And that night over the special little dinner she had fixed, she watched Jones. She could see that he knew it, but she didn't care. Finally, her father had gone to his books to study the records and note the day's archaeological activities in his journal. Indy took the path to the river. It wasn't his usual day — they all had days — but she supposed with the blood on him, he might. . . .

She had seen a man's body before. The natives rarely cared — in spite of any concern her father and Indy had for her innocence. None of them knew her mother had already explained who was made how and why. After gaining that amount of understanding, though, Marion had felt little interest in the subject until Indiana Jones had come along.

He bathed thoroughly and then plunged out to the middle of the river where the strong current kept the water cleaner, sweeping everything before it. Marion followed his progress, her footsteps silent in the magic of night; and when he came out, several yards down the bank from his clothes, her appearance took him completely by surprise.

"Marion!" His washcloth was enough to cover him — barely — but his body's reaction could not be concealed from her in the light of the full moon.

"Hello, Indy."

"Goddammit, will you get...out...of...here?!"

"No."

"Marion—!"

His voice broke on the word, his free hand already reaching for her; and in spite of a moment's thrilling fear, she did not let him escape.

†

"And of course, George came to visit my class." A page of children surrounding a nervously smiling George. "They were so sweet when I introduced him."

Children. Never any children. Not with Indy those few nights they had shared before Abner sent him away...or with any of the men after Abner died and left her stuck halfway around the world from her native land. But why not? The facts of life were simple and incapable. She should have, but she didn't.

Luck. And the most startling thought...I'd like to have a kid. Loose another Indy on the world? Not like Fayah and Sallah, though. Maybe one or two. Not nine. But more than a stupid monkey. And what kind of father would Indiana Jones make? Probably just like Abner. But mother warned me. I'd know how to take care of him.

"And here is the wedding. I actually had them take a picture while we said our vows."

Daring. Amelia Parrish, truly beautiful, in a setting of white satin and flowers. Dr. and Mrs. Parrish with a Santa Claus faced man in religious robes. The bride posing before an altar. Two anonymous figures facing one another, hand in hand.

The Nazis had bound them back to back on a light pole, but for a moment Indy's fingers touched hers warmly. She wore a pink satin nightgown borrowed from a pirate. And behind the altar where the sheen of gold glowed, Rene Bellog, who had had her — to his regret — intoned solemn words in a strange language. Not Hebrew. Her father had spoken that, taught her some. Then the terror began: "Shut your eyes, Marion! Don't look!" Indy's voice, sanity in the midst of unheard sounds, unknowable dangers. And in the darkness behind her eyelids, while a fire surrounded and engulfed them and melded them together forever, she had seemed to remember someone had promised her happiness...once.

The book lay closed in Amelia's lap, her fingers gently caressing its textured binding.

"And where did Dr. Jones take you to propose, Marion?"

Her hands clenched to fists as she fought to make sound emerge from her tightened throat. "He...took me away from Nepal to Cairo."

"Cairo?" The Thrift woman could have taught the Nazis about methods of interrogation. "In Egypt?"

"Yes."

"You traveled together...alone?"

Now the suspicion and a kind of eagerness in the words broke through the haze in Marion's thoughts, and she looked up quickly.

Amelia Parrish wore a frown. "But then...where did you get married?"

Her voice was innocence itself, but the faces around them held a glow of fascination, and Marion drew a deep breath, realizing now what she must have known all along. These women were no different from any group of native women. They gossip. They ruled their world according to rigid, self-imposed standards. And the headman's wife had called them together to stand in judgment of the newest wife.

Marion raked the Parrish woman with a look of scorn and quietly rose to her feet, pulling her gloves from her purse to put them on. "We were married on board a ship in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. The captain performed the ceremony." She laughed inside at the thought of Katanga's black beauty in the midst of her 'wedding album'. These foolish women would probably faint at the sight. "I have the license...if you want to see it."

Alexandra Parnell seemed to shrug with her eyebrows and gave Marion a look which said "it's your fight." Thrift smelled blood.

"What in the world were you doing in Nepal?"

Marion smiled. "My father was on an expedition. I was with him as assistant. He died there. Then...I owned an inn and entertained the natives."

Flora Thrift stared at her, dumbfounded, and the silence in the other women belonged to a primitive tension that filled the room.

"Alexandra!?" A big male voice cut through the atmosphere of the conservatory. "Look who I met crossing the park! He's looking for his lady."

The women turned with one motion. Two men stood in the doorway. Randolph Parnell was a handsome, powerful man, a strong fighter and diplomat for the school. He faced the wives of his faculty without trepidation. Indiana Jones, bigger, lean, with hidden talents, was visibly braced against the bright-eyed gazes turned toward him.

Marion heard the telltale intake of breath from Amelia Parrish and glanced swiftly at the circle of women. They had come to a new focus, a very old drive that was usually masked and leashed by the civilization they represented. Even Flora Thrift gleamed with the awareness. "...dying to see the woman who could hold Indiana Jones' attention for more than a few weeks...."

Dr. Jones' wife laughed, short, proud. "Thank you for a lovely and educational afternoon, Mrs. Parnell."

With a knowledgeable look of warning and respect, Alexandra smiled. "I do hope you will join us again."

"By all means. It was so...nice meeting everyone." She walked across to Indy, feeling the envious stares as she took his arm. He looked relieved and puzzled at the same time, but he clamped her hand to his side in the old way. "Oh, Mrs. Parrish. Thank you especially for the entertainment."

♀

Luckily, Indy held his tongue until they were out in the cool twilight. "What was that about?"

She hugged his arm to her. "Just another day in the jungle village."

"Oh. You okay?"

"Fine."

But she could tell he was still nervous, and then it came out.

"Marion, about yesterday. I trust you. I don't trust them!" He jerked his head back toward the president's residence. "I feel kind of responsible for you...for...."

"Now, look, my friend. That's over and done with. Right?"

"Right."

"Besides, I feel responsible for you." But he didn't rise to the question. "What is it, Indy?"

"I don't know." He struggled for words a minute. "You...you've settled in so...It's like you never lived anywhere else."

They continued in silence, crossing a street, beginning to climb the hill to his— their home. It was true what he said, and the afternoon's events now seemed a tribal rite admitting her to the ranks of the married, the possessors of these tiny house-worlds. But what about partners?

She and Indy had been partners to find the Ark. He wanted it, so she wanted it. But his government had taken it away from him, and she knew he worried and dreamed nightmares over the thought of that incredible power in the hands of the American military. She felt his pain, but she didn't know how to read his signals. What would he do now?

A stab of fear made her stumble, but she straightened her shoulders and went on, ignoring his look of question.

Abner had always taken his family with him. Or had her mother insisted on going? But traveling with Abner had never been quite the same as being hauled around the world in Indy's wake getting attacked by Germans and renegade French archaeologists. Maybe her father had been right. Indiana Jones was a bum, and any woman who thought he would settle down — or take her on as a partner — was simply fooling herself. Lord knew Marion had certainly made herself enough of a fool the first time. Had she now compounded that error?

"What did Marcus want, Indy?" It came out of nowhere, out of the darkness of her own fears.

He jumped, and his voice was surprised. "The museum wants me to go to Marrakesh and try to get back that Peruvian piece I told you about."

"Yes. Belloq. And...?"

"Well, I didn't know if you would want—" He paused. "I mean, I think we could afford two tick—"

She pulled him to a stop facing her. "Indiana Jones, did you really think I'd want to stay here? This is a warning! You leave me behind with those women, and I guarantee you none of them will be alive when you get back! And I'll be under arrest for murder!"

He laughed, startled, then stopped.

"That is, unless you don't want me to come," she continued, a great pit opening before her as he remained silent.

Disconcerted but recovering, he finally answered, "It might be dangerous."

"Dangerous?" She laughed in disbelief. "Dangerous!?"

He laughed, too, and turned them again up the hill. "I couldn't think of going without you. But then...yesterday you were so angry—"

"Hey, Jones! Have you got five thousand dollars on you?"

"Five thou—" He looked down at her. "No! You know what I make!"

She grinned into his bewildered eyes. "Well, until I get my five thousand dollars back, we're partners! Remember?"

They stood at the front door then, and under the outside light, a slow smile answered her. "Yeah. I forgot. Partners. I'll give Marcus the word."

He dug for his key and opened up, escorting her through. "I tell you what. I'll pay you back at a penny a day."

As he closed the door, Marion threw her hat on the hall table and turned to him, pulling off her gloves with

deliberation. "And how long do you expect that to take, Jones?"

His eyes flashed gold as he pulled her against him. "At least a thousand years...Jones."

For a moment as he held her, she heard torches sputtering. A full moon tonight. No children...yet. "That should be just about right."

UPDATE

Archeology 101:

Digging in the DOD

There's an old Hindu proverb about the questionable wisdom of disturbing the den of a sleeping tiger, but Political Economist Dr. Haddad Buratty (University of Wisconsin, Harvard, Brown) doesn't seem worried. His new book, "In the Eagle's Talon" (Dodd, Mead & Co., 1981, \$14.95), has stirred up a number of sleeping tigers over at the Department of Defense, and they're roaring their displeasure over his revelations. Buratty has taken the dry compilation of recently declassified U.S. military project expense documents and, in a style better suited to "Amazing Stories" than political or economic history, has laid it all out for the rest of America to read and digest.

Buratty's major and most gleefully rendered anecdote concerns a 1936 globe-trotting archeological expedition by a U.S. professor of antiquities. Tame stuff? Not so, says Buratty. Said archeologist was funded by U.S. Army Intelligence on a mysterious trip that took him entirely around the globe in a race for religious artifacts coveted by no less than Adolf Hitler. Complicating the ludicrous nature of the trip were a mysterious stop in Nepal (purpose unknown), a charter on a merchant vessel from the Greek Island of Milos to Southampton, U.K., and the acquisition en route of a wife.

The mysterious artifact that the professor, Dr. Indiana Jones (now retired and professor emeritus of the University of Chicago, Branford College and Columbia University) was after? Well, now, that seems to be the point where all the heretofore revealing documents become somewhat sketchy and their language muddy. According to DOD spokesman Colonel William E. Howlett, U.S. Army, the nature of the artifact and other attendant information "must remain classified—in the national interest, of course."

Sure that Colonel Howlett's attempted obfuscation pointed toward the trail of something worthwhile, NEWSWEEK set out to interview Professor Jones, his family and whatever colleagues might be able to cast light on the mystery.

If all this sounds like the well worn plot of a Saturday melodrama, stay tuned. Further attempts at interview elicited no clarification from the doctor or any of his family. NEWSWEEK reporters were met at the gate of the Jones family compound near Mount

Evans, Colorado by Dr. Jones' wife, Marion. (Jones, now 81, and his wife, the former Marion Ravenwood, now 70, apparently acquired their own mountain sometime in the last 20 years and, when the professor retired, removed themselves to said mountain and are rarely seen by the local inhabitants.) The lady refused comment on any portion of the story, would not allow anyone in to see her husband, who she said was at work and "couldn't be bothered with such nonsense," and used a well oiled, 12-gauge shotgun to emphasize her invitation to leave the grounds immediately.

A little investigation soon unearthed the whereabouts of three Jones offspring, who were sought out to shed a bit of illumination on this "archeological find" in the DOD records concerning their father's 1936 global jaunt. None seemed to know much about it.

Adopted son, Marcus Brody-Jones, 39, a successful Arizona aerospace engineer, (NEWSWEEK, "Rockwell International: Today the stars," March 16), was amazed at the entire idea. "Sounds like bad Hollywood to me," he said, when contacted at his Scottsdale home. "I never heard of any such trip, and I think, if it was all that important, the folks would have mentioned it at some time." Asked about the idea of either of his parents being involved with an occult race against Hitler's henchmen to recover religious artifacts, Jones laughed. His father, he said, was a noted scholar, recognized for his contributions to the field of archeology and well-respected by the academic community at large. "They're (the academicians) not the kind of people to embrace wild-eyed extremists of the sort my father and mother would have to be to get tangled up in something like this. My parents—and if you ever met them, you'd know it for a fact—*always* deal in reality."

Daughter (also adopted) Karina Osata-Jones, 29, historian, occultist and author of growing note ("No Lone Star" (1975), "Generation Ships" (1977) and "The Future is Out There" (1980), Globe Press, New York), interrupted during her preparations for an extended research trip, could add little to her brother Marcus' statements. On the question of Dr. Jones' religious beliefs, Ms. Osata-Jones said during a brief telephone interview, "My father is a 'believer'—yes. He believes that there is a power in the universe that is greater than ourselves. Beyond that, I doubt he would say very much, even if you could ask him directly. He is a very private person." About the 1936 trip, she knew little if anything. "All I can say," she said, "is that I know my parents were married in 1936 by the captain of a ship on which they were sailing in the Mediterranean. To me, that doesn't sound very much like a wild scramble

for archeological finds that pitted them against Hitler, for heaven's sake!" Asked what her father's opinion was of her own rather avant-garde ideas linking the earth's heritage of civilization with possible extra-terrestrial contact, Ms. Osata-Jones answered stiffly just before she hung up, "My father has never tried to put harnesses and guide reins on the minds of his children!"

The third Jones child is Dr. Harold Two Leaves Jones, 34, an adopted half-Amerind who is himself a well known archeologist. After a bit of searching, he was finally discovered at the site of a University of Mexico summer dig in the Yucatan. Commenting on his father's work, Dr. Jones, the younger, said, "Classical antiquity was really Dad's field. I don't know all that much about it." (Dr. Jones modestly failed to mention his landmark work with the American Indian digs in Arizona and New Mexico that have won for him the Dalton Goodwin Scott Fellowship, archeology's "Oscar," which he is using to fund his Yucatan-based studies linking certain chains of Mayan and Amerind cultural events.) When asked about the artifact that his father was commissioned by the Army to find in 1936, Dr. Jones shrugged. "My dad was good—is good. If they sent him out for something, he got it for them. But I couldn't tell you what it was. I don't have the scholarship to speculate on the nature of the find, and Dad never mentioned the business. I can tell you one thing, though: he never has been too happy with the U.S. government—especially not with the bureaucracy. He just happens to think it's the best bet as a government that we've got right now." Dr. Jones contemplated the matter further. Then he added, "Nope. I just can't recall anything about such a trip. But I'm not surprised either. Dad always was the best one to tell a secret to. Hell could freeze over, and he'd never reveal a thing."

If the foregoing interviews are any example, Dr. Indiana Jones' children do him proud, following in the footsteps of the successful, strong and more than ordinarily silent scholar who continues to sit uncommunicatively at the center of a modern mystery.

Haddad Buratty's conclusions? "Oh, there is definitely more there than meets the eye, but I doubt you will ever discover its true nature. Between Dr. Jones' calculated reticence and the determined obstinacy of the U.S. government's military bureaucracy—why, they could be sitting on the greatest archeological find of all time, and nobody would ever know!"

ANITA AURISY and HANLEY FRAZIER
with Deborah Goldman in New York
and Robert Bellarmino and Gail M.
Buchwalter in Los Angeles

Archeology 202:

Digging at the Box Office

It may be early, but the "evidence unearthed" is absolutely conclusive. Excavation into the statistical archives of the film industry bible Variety shows clearly that Hollywood's brightest entry in this summer's light entertainment sweepstakes is, far and away, "Ark Wars" (NEWSWEEK, "Movies: Spectacular Return of the Cliffhanger," June 15).

Only a month in national release, the film is creating round-the-block, three-deep ticket lines at every showing, threatening to bust every box office record in sight before its run is much older. Week by week, the movie is running a "cliffhanger mystery" of its own quite apart from the improbable, irresistible adventures of its peripatetic, swashbuckling archeologist hero, Arkansas Smith: to wit, just how big will the take be at *this* week's end? Thus far, Variety reports the movie's gross receipts have topped the \$30 million mark.

Nationwide disenchantment over the new Administration's political blunders and the worsening economic picture have sent the public into theaters hungering with a vengeance for escape from reality. "Ark Wars" gives it to them double in spades: two hours of non-stop thrills, chills, near misses, a square-jawed hero, an equally tough heroine and lots of villains to hiss and boo.

With weak showings by a number of highly touted but disappointing summer competitors ("Captain Marvel II," "Starfinder," "Dick Tracy," "The Ani-Pups' Sting"), "Ark Wars" position as front running film of the season seems completely secure.

For co-creators Gregory Landon, 36 ("Stellar Knight," "Galactic Revenge") and Sterling Seidenham, 31 ("The Star Touched," "Sea Menace," "Hell, This is War?"), it's all sweet satisfaction and righteous retribution as their \$22 million boyhood dream-into-film knocks 'em dead at the box office and converts detractors who, six months ago, treated the two with ill-disguised contempt. Despite the all-time box office winning duo of films under his belt, Landon last year had to pull out of Hollywood for the freedom to march to his own creative drummer (NEWSWEEK, "People: Goodbye to All That," August 18, 1980). Seidenham has carried the curse of being labeled "brilliant but unreliable" from the day his World War II comedy

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extravaganza was named the wide screen failure of 1979 (NEWSWEEK, "Movies: The Flop Heard 'Round the World," November 12, 1979).

With the roaring success of "Ark Wars," however, the two newly christened wunderkinde of filmdom are laughing all the way to the bank as critics and movie-goers alike hail their flick as "the best film made in 38 years." Said one industry insider, "As far as Hollywood is concerned, Gregory now resides on Mount Olympus, and Sterling can turn iron into gold." Pure gold. These days, when Messrs. Landon and Seidenham talk, even E.F. Hutton listens.

JASON KRAMER in Hollywood

THE NEW YORK TIMES, August 21, 1982

NEUTRON BOMB BILL SIGNED BY PRESIDENT

SO-CALLED "CLEAN" DEVICE WOULD
LEAVE CITIES, INDUSTRY CENTERS
UNTOUCHED, SPREAD NO RADIATION

By Blandings Kelso
Special to The New York Times

Washington, Aug. 8 — Amidst a chorus of worldwide protests, coupled with praise from supporters, President Ronald Reagan today signed the so-called "clean bomb" bill into law.

Republican Congressional leaders hailed the move as yet another in the long series of victories the Administration has garnered since Reagan took office. As expected, critics were strongly vocal in their condemnation of the move.

Democratic legislators, and moderates on both sides of the aisle, saw in the bill's passage a victory beyond that for the Administration. They bitterly declared it a big win for the Defense Department, which has been attempting to move steadily forward since the 1980 Presidential election, regaining ground lost during the Carter Administration years when Defense spending faced severe curtailments in the wake of national feeling about Vietnam.

Dismayed American critics, led by usually moderate Congressional opposition leaders, were equally harsh in their judgments.

Said minority whip Tip O'Neill, Democrat of California, of the bill, "We're going to be hard pressed to explain to the American people how it is that we managed to allow passage of a bill that puts a higher priority on property than it does on human life. The N-Bomb is a disgrace!"

Predictably, Republican supporters, and hawks of all persuasions, lined up four-square behind the President, who declared at the media-covered bill-signing, "I consider this a very meaningful bill — a real landmark. Not only

have we made a very necessary step forward in re-establishing this country's defense posture, but we have made a significant step forward for humanity. While we hope never to have to use such a weapon of war, we're encouraged, even heartened, by the fact that this bomb will not cause the sort of devastation and radiation that other, older defensive armaments would have brought to this planet."

Clearly disturbed by the President's words, Western allies were quick to point out the weapon's effects.

"Destruction and devastation are usually measured in wartime in the grim cadence of the body count," said British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in London. "While this bomb will leave all the buildings intact, it will decimate any human population on which it is turned. It is horrifying to think of an American President taking comfort from such a thing!"

"It is utterly ghastly to think of it at all — even as we know that there was probably no alternative to its installation as a formal weapon of war," added Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin in Tel Aviv. "We certainly share the President's hope that matters will never deteriorate to the point where we will find ourselves either the N-Bomb's beneficiaries or its victims."

Soviet reaction was swift and angry. "The American President's sword rattling has reached the point of insanity! In the past, he has at least given lip service to the concepts of world peace, disarmament and the SALT negotiations. With his signature on this bill, however, he has come out from behind his false mask of righteousness and shown himself for the warmonger of what we had hoped were by-gone years," said a Tass Agency dispatch.

According to a Defense Department spokesman, the special neutron bomb emplacements will take upward of two years to locate at strategic response bases around the world. In the meantime, he said, present levels of conventional as well as short- and long-range defensive weapons should prove more than adequate to meet any threat to the U.S. or its allies.

NEW YORK POST, April 13, 1988

MIDDLE EAST EXPLODES!

ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICTS BOILS OVER!

ROCKET WEAPONS LAUNCHED ON TEL AVIV!
RESPONSE FROM TEHERAN, ISLAMABAD!

COMMUNITIES CUT OFF! OIL FIELDS AFLAME

U.S. DRAFT — PREZ ASKS 1-MIL. VOLUNTEERS!

NEW YORK POST, May 12, 1988

!ASIA ERUPTS!

CHINESE INVADE VIETNAM, LAGOS, THAILAND!

INDIA, PAKISTAN, BANGLADESH AT WAR!

GUERRILLA FIGHTING, MOB TACTICS
SPREAD ACROSS TWO CONTINENTS!

THE NEW WASHINGTON STAR, June 16, 1988

US. FORCE MASSACRED

REDS DROP N-BOMB!

London (UPI) — Late word was received today from the area around Wiesbaden, Germany, where U.S. and Soviet ground forces had been engaged since late Tuesday afternoon. The entire force of U.S. infantry units — along with the large force of Russian tank troops opposing them — was systematically wiped out by a Soviet-launched nuclear device believed to be of the neutron bomb variety. Among the casualties: the newly-graduated class from the Ethan Allen Military Academy which had reached the front only one week ago.

THE NEW WASHINGTON STAR, May 2, 1988

WAR IN EUROPE!!

US-REDS FACE OFF ON GERMAN SOIL

"LIMITED" NUCLEAR WAR
SEEN AHEAD FOR EUROPE

AP — In the wake of May Day celebrations behind the Iron Curtain — even as the Middle East holocaust flared anew and refugees crowded ports in the eastern Mediterranean — troops of heavily armed Soviet infantry accompanied by tank units of the Vladivostok class marched across Eastern Europe to mass along the Iron Curtain borders.

THE NEW WASHINGTON STAR, June 1, 1988

MOBILIZATION ORDER GIVEN

MILITARY ACADEMIES GRADUATE
ACCELERATED CLASSES
FOR WAR EFFORT

Bennington, VT (AP) — The first "Moral Majority" class — numbering 1,624 in cadets in all — was graduated here today, two months ahead of schedule, from the Ethan Allen Military Academy.

In an unprecedented move, the entire class volunteered for immediate combat on the European front. An Army recruiter was present to administer the oath as soon as formal commencement ceremonies were concluded.

(see page 6)

NEW YORK POST, June 17, 1988

WORLD WAR THREE?!

U.S. DROPS N-BOMB ON MOSCOW!

IMMEDIATE RETALIATION EXPECTED

DAN RATHER: Good evening to you from Minneapolis, Minnesota. It is a calm clear winter's night here in the nation's capital. The mood in the Presidential Residence is sober but hopeful as the Chief Executive surveys reports tonight of the recent research reconnaissance flights sent over the outlying districts of New England, the Middle Atlantic Coast, and California, where Soviet N-Bombs wiped out the populace less than six months ago.

According to the readouts from sensor equipment aboard the five Ferret Class Air Force spy planes, the areas in question show absolutely no signs of lingering radiation or the widespread damage that was feared by some.

DAN RATHER: Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, from our studios here in the nation's capital.

Our news tonight is a cause for joy. After months of work and worry, communications have been successfully re-established with Glasgow, Scotland; with Sydney, Australia; Capetown, South Africa, and several of the United States of South America, including Argentina and Peru.

Word was also received here just before we went on the air that a comm signal has been received, late this evening, Minneapolis time, from somewhere in the People's Republic of China. We hope to have confirmation on this before the end of our broadcast this evening.

Meanwhile, in other news...

DAN RATHER: Good evening, ladies and gentlemen of the world.

If I seem a bit overwhelmed in my report to you this evening, I'm sure you will understand in only a few moments.

This is, of course, the first worldwide broadcast from our recently expanded facilities in the new Capital State of Minnesota in the Northwest Hemisphere. As you have heard me tell you for the past few weeks: the U.S. and its Allies around the globe—mutual survivors of the recent horrendous worldwide holocaust—all deliberately planned this evening's landmark broadcast on this, the first day of the first New Year in the last decade of this millennium, as a sign of the hoped-for peace that we trust will characterize the future we all share on this fragile planet of ours.

That would have been story enough for any newscaster in this land of ours on this night. And I would have been happy to report it.

Instead, I am humbled by an awesome privilege that fate and history have granted me. For it is my profound pleasure to report to you that the most important story of our time—perhaps of all time—has come to pass.

Ladies and gentlemen: there is life on other worlds! It is human life, like unto our own in form and intelligence, and—thank God from all of us on this lately much beleaguered planet—benevolent in intent. Even as I speak to you this night, representatives of this first star-faring race—who call themselves the Faerho—are meeting in the Presidential Palace with President Jefferson Teague, members of his cabinet and his senior advisory staff. Representatives of the surviving world nations are expected to arrive in Minneapolis within hours to meet with the President and his interstellar guests.

But now, without further delay, we go directly to our cameras—live—in front of the Palace!

PASSAGE

"It is not of this earth."

Sallah

She was packing to leave for good. One of the small, miraculously strong and lightweight cartons held her customary robes — the brightest colors in her wardrobe — and the few sanitary items they had said she would need until she became accustomed to their utilities. All the other cartons had been stretched to their size limits and into them went the books. Six English language versions of the Bible, a copy of the Koran and a translation, the Upanishads, an excellent Torah her brother had discovered in a war ghost town in Arizona, the I Ching, the Egyptian Book of the Dead, Sandburg's Lincoln series, a dog-eared schoolchild's History of the United States that ended in 1952, and an incongruous collection of corresponding histories from various longlived countries that had existed prior to 1985. Another carton held mysterious, airtight plastic boxes. And another and another.

She straightened and stretched with a hand to the small of her back. The warm, gold caftan flowed with every movement, glowing in the soft light of candles placed in sturdy holders around the sparsely furnished room. The mirror above the mantel multiplied their effect; and she looked for a moment at the reflection of herself.

"No longer young is how they say it, I guess," she muttered. The candlelight might smooth out the lines of 39 years, but she had never tried to deny them. In truth, the almond-shaped black eyes and china pure skin had a beauty that came from not attempting to deny any part of living. Her hair was still black, straight and luxurious, short cut for practicality. She knew precisely how many of the teeth in her smile were original. They said that the technology was failing now, too. But not for long...not for long.

A somehow frowning atmosphere encompassed her as she stood there, although her features remained unshadowed. A sigh, a premonition, a hope...

Hard knuckles rapped at the door to the room, banishing the feeling, and she could hear male voices outside, arguing. Smiling, she abandoned self-contemplation and went to admit the debaters.

"Hello, Kara," the tallest one said, leaning down to kiss her cheek lightly. He was a child of technology, and his aura showed it, a straightforward, no-nonsense kind of presence. His bright blue eyes surveyed her efforts and came back to her, an imp of dry humor peeking from within. "Taking the whole library?"

"Of course, Marc. You don't think they'll have anything decent to read, do you? Go on inside, and don't sit on any of the crates. They can take pressure from the inside, but if you touch them, they start to shrink again unless they're full. Go on! I want to talk to Harry!"

He obeyed her shooing motions, leaving the doorway clear for the other man.

In spite of the withdrawn and guarded aspect of his psychic presence, this one enfolded her in a warm hug. And she understood the dichotomy, his fear of the pain at her going, his determination to meet that pain and his absolute refusal to let it keep him from feeling and demonstrating his love. Words were unnecessary between them.

Together they faced their older brother.

"Where are Ann and the children, Marc?" she asked then, belatedly noting the relative quiet in the hall.

He grinned. "They've gone on to the Departure point. The boys were yelling and little Marion was flying somewhere...out there. Ann and I thought you could do without that."

"And Juana is helping Ann," Harry added.

"Well, I'll have to make sure and hug all of them before I go." She smiled at them both. "You know, it may sound crazy, but I'm glad it's just us now."

Harry's arm tightened on her shoulders.

Marcus nodded and then looked around at the organized clutter of packing that surrounded him. "I don't like this, Kara. It feels wrong."

"You just don't believe in extraterrestrial saviors, Marc," Harry said, a deep bass chuckle lightening what might have been fighting words at another time. "Kara is going. She's got an invitation, something most of the people in the world today — most of the people in the world ten years ago — would have given their grandmothers for. If she wants to accept, that's her business."

"Yes it is," she agreed, slipping out of the circle of his arm. "And I haven't much time. Will you help me finish?"

Marc frowned. "Why did you wait until now to pack? Everybody else already has their things on the truck."

"We saw it as we came in," Harry replied to her questioning glance. "Even Kaufman was there with a backpack and duffel bag."

"Well..." she paused, feeling an unaccustomed awkwardness in the moment and knowing it lay within her...not them. "I just finished gathering these things today. Will you help me?"

"Of course," they chorused and grinned at one another.

"Okay, Marc, you take care of that pile," she instructed, pointing to several stacks of books that had been individually wrapped and placed carefully in groups of no more than four. "And, Harry, pack up the rest of those trays."

They glanced at their assignments, at each other, and then at her.

"Come on, Kara—"

"Because you would stop to read the books, and Marc would want to check every tray for flaws in the material," she replied steadily. "I don't have time."

And the repetition of that declaration set them silently to work.

"Coffee?" she asked a couple of hours later, watching Marc gently caress the edges of a Book of Hours before setting it in place in the top of a carton.

He looked up and nodded, a shy flush coming to his cheeks when he saw her sympathetic smile.

"I'll have some of that herb tea," Harry said absently from a far corner of the room. He had quickly reduced his packing to a brisk, tidy series of motions that had nearly completed his task. "You know, this plastic stuff...it sure does make it easy to keep things for a long time. I wonder what archaeology would have been like if they'd had it centuries ago."

As Kara moved toward the small hot plate to boil water, Marcus laughed. "If they had, you would be out of a job, Blood Brother."

The words sent her mind kiting back across the years. They had all been told early on of their adoption, but when Harry started investigating his heritage — at first in the mass media representations — he had quickly come across the concept of blood oaths and exchanges of fealty. One rainy afternoon with their parents away had seen the culmination of research in each child's area of interest. Marcus had provided sterilization techniques for the knife, which Harry had removed from the cabinet containing the collection left him by his Navaho grandfather. Kara had written the ceremony, creating it from an amalgam of the sacred rituals from many of the cultures she had already begun to explore. The fire in the living, central room of the house had cast a magic spell, endowing her words with a sense of power. The blood had flowed, careful and controlled, into the roughly carved wooden bowl, and — once their wounds had been bound, hand to hand to hand — they had together watched, fire-enchanted, as the flames consumed the red-stained vessel. From that time, through games and competitions and loving and war, they had been brothers and sister beyond any legal definition of word.

Now, as usual, Harry seemed to have followed her thoughts exactly. "Do you suppose Mom ever knew?"

Marc's smile was soft and reminiscent. "She always knew...everything."

"And Dad?" Harry suggested, turning to Kara.

She nodded, remembering the look in their father's ever-changing eyes as he had entered the house, stepped into the living room, glanced at the fire. He had inhaled — as though sniffing some remnant of the power that had flowed in that place — and when he studied the three children, his emerald gaze had lingered longest on her. "Oh yes, he knew."

A gentle bubbling filled the silence that answered her, and, quickly, she turned to deal with mugs, teapot and oh-so-precious coffee. When she looked around again, the last of the cartons had been sealed. Harry stood, hands in pockets, by the curtained window, his head cocked as though accepting the brimming mug she offered.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" he said quietly.

"Yes," she replied with equal solemnity. "Oh, I understand your feelings, Marc, but—"

"I'm afraid," he muttered. "For you."

Sternly controlling the tears that threatened, she smiled lovingly before returning to the hot plate. As the delicate scent of jasmine filled the room, Harry came back toward them, one hand reaching for a mug, the other brandishing a sheaf of papers that had caught his eye along the way.

"Well, well, well!" he said with a taut, questioning smile. "See what I found, Sister-mine? The packing inventory! Marc, look at this. Pravda, New York Times since the beginning, The London Times, Le Monde...."

Kara stiffened slightly, and then left them, going to a chair by the empty fireplace. Even without the smell and color and bright of flames, it was still the warm, natural focus of the room. Eventually silenced, Marc and Harry came to sit with her.

"Kara, this is George Kaufman's list," Marc said finally with a faint note of accusation in his voice.

"Your powers of deduction are marvelous, Biggest Brother," she replied in an attempt at lightness that he only partially responded to with a shrug of his eyebrows and an unwilling smile.

"His name's on every page!" Harry put in then, leaning forward with the papers clenched in his fists. "Kara, why are you obliging that noisy, rude, self-righteous—"

"Whoa!" she interrupted firmly, surprising herself with the force of her protest. "Noisy? Yes. Rude? He just can't and/or won't tell a lie — even a social one. Self-righteous? Definitely not. George is a little too sure of what he thinks he knows, perhaps, but—"

"But what he thinks he knows, Little Sister, is that your theories are bullshit. He's said it often enough in the past."

She grinned at Marc. "Ah, but I'm changing that, slowly but surely." It gave them pause. Then they spoke together. "You are changing him?"

"Yes."

"What the hell—!"

"Wait, Harry." Marcus put out a restraining hand to the other and turned to Kara with a look of carefully neutral inquiry that made her laugh inside. He was very serious. "Kara, Kaufman has been your philosophical opponent, at least, for several years...since you were both in grade school, as I recall."

"I think 'theoretical' opponent would be a better choice," she interposed softly.

"Very well," he acceded. "In addition to which — after having been passed over when the original invitations were sent out, he has somehow wangled himself a place to go with you and fifty other carefully chosen human beings. He wasn't wanted and he pushed his way in!"

"Mom would have called that 'ungentlemanly'," Harry murmured, bringing smiles to all of them.

Kara nodded then. "You're both right in every detail. But, Marc, you're the one who told me just tonight



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that you don't like the feel of this setup, and you won't even acknowledge the psychic world! Do you think I'm so starry-eyed that I can't read the signs, too?" She took a deep breath. "Fifty human beings, yes. There are farmers and artisans and musicians and poets...with various wives and husbands and children. And one mystic believer, me. No astronauts, no political leaders, no diplomats, no one with any kind of military or combat training at all! But worst of all, except for me, there are no trained minds invited, no one whose natural questioning state has come anywhere near approaching a scientific methodology. And I wouldn't have it if I hadn't grown up in the family I did."

She paused, wondering what to say next; and they sat quietly, waiting attentively. "George Kaufman is a historian and a trained teacher, regardless of his 'factual' putdowns of my theological/mystical interpretations of history. He is no less a scientist than either of you. Harry, he's even in a field related to yours! Also, he served his country in Vietnam and came out of it as close to mentally healthy as anyone could. Did you know he lost a leg there? Perhaps that's minor in comparison to war injuries we've seen since — but he has military training. Just in case."

"Lastly, he wanted to go and he said so. All the rest of you were being so gentlemanly and biting the bullet so you wouldn't seem too childish. George made a fuss about it, and yes, he wangled an invitation. I wangled it for him!"

With a sigh she sat back and looked away from their varying degrees of surprise. "Sorry. I didn't meant to get emotional about it. I guess I'm feeling nervous."

Marc cleared his throat. "And with reason, apparently. You're right. You've thought the matter through methodically, and have reached the conclusion I...have been too starry-eyed to admit. They're taking only one of our best minds — two, with Kaufman, and I would have thought they'd want the trained scientists."

"Now wait a minute, you two," Harry protested. "You're putting all sorts of negatives into this situation that may not belong. Perhaps they are simply taking those people with the mental discipline to create beauty but who haven't been...well, maybe 'contaminated' by our theories and opinions on the nature of things. It would be easier for such 'innocents', if you will, to assimilate a whole new culture and way of life, to adapt to a much higher technology than we've ever enjoyed on Earth."

"I've thought of that, too, Big Brother," Kara answered. "And it still frightens me. We've all read enough science fiction to be familiar with the problem of generation ships: some catastrophe happens on board or on a planet and the children forget or they are not taught who they are and where they came from, why they are going. Those are ships of which the entire crew is of Earth! How much how quickly can be lost when that is not true?"

"I don't know," Marc said thoughtfully. "The United States of America tried the melting pot idea, and it didn't really work because the people held on to their diverse cultures and histories."

"It seemed to make the country stronger for a while," Harry pointed out. "Look at the three of us! We're a perfect example of the pot. Kin of a remarkable family for Mom and Dad who were — essentially — WASPs."

"Yes," she said evenly. "But America's melting pot had an infusion of new Old-World blood — from both Europe and the Orient — every few years, and immigrants could always get news from relatives still at home. You don't seem to have grasped that this is a one-way trip I'm going on. There will be no new infusion of blood. Instead, there will be a constant bombardment of new sensations and ideas and...and assimilation."

"That's why you wangled a seat on the flight for George Kaufman, historian," Marc theorized, his troubled gaze staring far beyond the confines of the walls of the room. He didn't seem to see her nod. "And that's why you're packing — for him — every single historical and related treatise or book or textbook you can."

She nodded again. "They said he could go, but they wouldn't give him any luggage space."

Harry looked up, his black eyes snapping with worry. "Do they know that you're doing all this...apparently in opposition to their wishes?"

"Yes, they know," Kara whispered. "They don't seem to have any objections. At least, none they care to make to me. I...that frightens me, too."

"Well, then," Marcus mused. "I guess the next question is how did you wangle him an invitation? Unless you used your standing as a sort of herald of their coming?"

Her hands clenched into fists; then she sighed and forced herself to relax. "I was hoping you wouldn't ask that."

"Why?" Harry said incredulously.

She grimaced self-consciously. "Oh, for selfish reasons. You see, I...don't want to mar your memories of me. I love you both. I'd hate to think I left you thinking badly of me."

Simultaneously, they each appropriated one of her hands.

"Kara," Harry said softly, his voice deep and concerned, but he was unable to go on.

"I'll — we'll hold a promise till we hear what you've got to say, but there's not much you could do that would make that happen," Marc finished for them both.

Now the tears collected in her eyes and silently rolled down her cheeks. Her throat tightened, making speech impossible, and as she closed her eyes convulsively, the two men moved in from either side, their arms warm and comforting around her shoulders. Several moments passed, and then a huge, clean kerchief came to one of her hands. Sniffing, she performed a clean-up operation on her face and smiled weakly at her brothers who had moved back to their own chairs.

"Thank you," she croaked finally, and they all laughed at the sound of the words. She cleared her throat. "Actually, Marc, you're right on both counts. I used my herald status. And I used my feminine wiles...sort of. I told him I'd take his books if he would do something for me. He agreed, and the result helped support me when I told them he had to come, too."

"Had to come, too?" Marc prompted.

She looked down and then lifted her chin defiantly. "We're going as a family unit. Husband, wife...and child."

Harry took a deep breath. "Kara...!"

"Child? Whose child?" demanded Marc.

"His. And mine," she replied steadily, rushing now to get it all out. "I'm pregnant. Four months."

"Dr. Allen did an amniocentesis which came out incredibly positive for someone of my age after a nuclear war. And George is healthy. And...and...I wanted one."

Harry just continued to stare at her.

"But to take with you?" Marc blurted surging to his feet to tower over her. "That's what I like least about this whole setup. They're taking children with them. Healthy children that Earth will need as we try to rebuild. It's bad enough that peasant children from everywhere are being stolen, but you go and give them the perfectly healthy offspring of two brilliant, trained minds. What are you thinking of, Kara?"

Slowly, she rose to face him. "I'm thinking of the people who are going, Marc. George and I have already agreed to...make ourselves Earth-chauvinists. We'll probably be obnoxious as hell, and when the rest of you finally get out there, you'll wish you never heard of that Kaufman fellow and his crazy lady, Osata-Jones. But maybe...just maybe it will be important for someone to remember, to be taught, generation after generation, the stories of Earth, the beauty and the truths of the people who were born here." A gesture indicated the cartoons filling the space behind them. "Those are our texts." One hand came to rest on her abdomen, only slightly swollen now. "And this may be our first...our only student. That is what I'm thinking of."

"But...but George Kaufman?" Harry sputtered, on his feet now, too.

"Yes, George Kaufman," she said, amazing herself once again at the fierce protectiveness she felt for the abrasive, shrewd, argumentative man who was the father of her child. "He wanted to go for all the right reasons. And...he's a nice man."

A soft chiming came from outside the door. All three turned to look.

"My hosts have arrived," she said softly. "Quick, get your mugs. A toast. To Mom and Dad...and all our separate parents."

"And to our children," added Marcus, a warm smile lighting his eyes.

Kara swallowed tears with her tea; but Harry — the silent one — as usual, summed it all.

"To the ties between us...of our blood, of our world, of our love."

RENASCENCE

"Who knows? In a thousand years even you may be worth something!"

Rene Bellog

In the thousandth year of the bondage of the Earthkin, Raazor the Omniscient One, ruler of the Faerho and all their worlds, took the long unused StarTrail and sought out the ancient birthplace of his slaves. His great ship, crewed by three of his sisters and their mates, also bore the various ministers, governors and Tallymen of the StarWorlds. For his personal comfort one hundred clothes masters, seventy bathchildren and fifteen pet handlers journeyed with him. And his entourage included — perhaps wastefully as some of the more ambitious, less fearful said — one of each type of female to satisfy any desire he might feel at any given moment. To the surprise of many, he took with him to the surface the one who was also known as the Storyteller of Man.

As Myrilon — who was the first female to hold the position, and that by virtue of being her father Alon's only child — stepped from the Great One's shuttle to the ground where her ancestors had once walked, she looked around in mingled fear and relief: fear for what her Stories and Tales told her had happened to this place; relief that it seemed much like any other world she had visited in Raazor's train. Except that here her blood claimed kinship with that of all the creatures of every size, in the brush, on the plains, in the hills and the mountains. Her heart beat faster, and she forgot the others still crowding through the shuttle exit.

Just above the horizon, in a white-clouded blue sky that matched her eyes, a ghostly circle reflected the light of the morning sun, and she smiled at that inconstant moon that had so ordered the biological cycles of Earth that even after a thousand years and as many more worlds in space, the Earthkin were still ruled by lunar vagaries. Here on the ground a steady breeze caught at her gown and tried to push her forward. Foliage in varying shades of green surrounded the ship on three sides; and a living carpet of the same color, both tough and soft to her bare feet, stretched away from her down a gentle slope to a wide ribbon of blue that made its way between two brown borders. On the opposite shore lay their destination.

In fearful curiosity, Myrilon peered at the ruins that covered the river basin all the way to the hills in the far distance. Most of the city was now a matter of broken walls and fallen objects and crumbling pavement that was surrounded and covered by more of the bushes and trees and vines. But along the line of the shore a couple of buildings showed signs of restorative efforts by the inhabitants. Earthmen, she reminded herself. One was a low, squared structure with columns marching across the white-stoned front. And far to her right, a smaller, round building, also white, also columned, sat on a spit of land that pushed its way into the river. Between them she glimpsed other buildings in more or less the same decay as the rest of the city. And one object more.

A tall, spare obelisk rose proudly from among the jumble of vegetation and waste, and she gasped with the impact of reality.

"You know this place, Storyteller?"

Swiftly, she turned to face Raazor, bowing deeply before she looked up into the dark gold, handsome features. "I believe I do, Lord."

"Good. Good." He came to stand beside her and look over the city. "Your secret Tale has given me strange dreams. I can remember desiring one such as even you."

She flushed deeply. Her appearance, genetically untouched, often called for comment among both the Faerho and their Earthkin servants, and so far had caused her to be left blessedly untouched physically; but she had been taught pride: pride that it marked her for unabridged; pride in the hopeful people who had left this Earth in the company of the Faerho; pride in their dreams, in their strengths and in those things which the Faerho called weakness. She knew why Raazor had come to this world. And at her sides her hands curled into fists to hold her courage steady.

He turned from her then and with an economical gesture that instantly drew the entire party into orderly lines of progress, headed for the river. "Storyteller. By my side."

From this unfamiliar position at the head of the march — one which would soon become permanent, she hoped — Myrilon continued to absorb the look and feel of their surroundings. Halfway down the hill they detoured around a crumbling stone slab with an empty flame-cup occupying its center. Words had been inscribed at various places on the monument, but she did not need to see them clearly to know the place. Then they passed a clump of trees and a mass of rioting colors caught her eye — orange and pink and purple and a red that would match her blood — all crowding close to the ground, one another in magnificent abandon.

"Storyteller," Raazor murmured, pulling her lagging steps back to his side. "What is this place? It reeks of...."

"It is a cemetery, Lord, a place where they buried their honored dead." She glanced back at the memory-flame. "That was a monument to a much-loved man."

He nodded curtly, striding on at a pace that — combined with her inner excitement — kept her near breathless. She could hear the murmurs of those behind them, but little of the meaning carried to her, and she wondered again at his choice of companions for this moment.

One of his sisters, yes, was proper, but to bring the one who hated him? And Myrilon knew for a fact that the three Tallymen, muttering direly among their personal retinues of brown and gold patterned Earthkin, were Raazor's greatest enemies; they would try to destroy him here if he had not the power to fight them.

She smiled at that thought. The Power — the special gifts of the Faerho with which they fought one another and held their slaves — was about to reach a new strength ...but on her bidding. The Secret Tale that had given Raazor such disturbing dreams had lain hidden within the Storytellers from generation to generation until now. For only she, the last and a woman, could hold Raazor, could offer him a partner and companion with the unique political purity of her line. Thus he would have wife and power. She would secure power and, through it, the free-

dom of her people.

Her dowry? That which the Faerho had been seeking since before human life existed on Earth, the location of which was hidden deep within her special knowledge.

They had reached the river. Air skimmers were brought forward, and Raazor and his personal guards crossed first. Myrilon was in the second grouping, and as soon as she and his sister and the Tallymen had touched earth again, he set off once more. As the Faerho around her hesitated, Myrilon lifted her chin, grabbed her skirts in both hands and plunged into the tangle of growth in his wake.

†

Past the first barrier, the way became easier, leading between trees and over uneven ground where the sun speckled fallen leaves and other plants that grew in shade and coolness. In the shafts of light that penetrated the overhang, Myrilon studied the man before her, trying to view him without hatred, without the awe of an Earthkin for his lord.

Raazor was beautiful, of course. Those who had engineered his conception had seen to that, although he was only of average height for a Faerho. Golden curls lifted artfully in the breeze of his passing. His stride, the movements of his head, his hands, held much of grace. Yet the art of the engineers required of them a single flaw in each creation, even in the heir to all of Power, and Raazor's eyes chilled Myrilon. The thought of knowing him as husband somehow gave her panic.

He was not the only one who had suffered from dreams after she told him the Secret Tale. And his eyes — black, flat, hard like those of the serpent draped over his shoulders even now — were not the fantastically hued, piercing/haunting gaze of her night-thoughts. Nor could the huge golden orbs of most of the Faerho ever match the glowing green that filled her dreams and made promises of love such as she knew only from the Tales.

But she would honor the agreement spoken with Raazor in whispers, give him the power he needed to cement his reign, and when his heirs — her children — came to their Rights, the Earthkin would be free.

She looked up and around as the heavy brush — that had become second nature to dodge and circle — abruptly ended. She stood on the edge of a huge lawn that was bordered by wide broken avenues separating the fresh grass from the miraculously intact, magnificent buildings of the ancients. And as the rest of the party straggled into the open, she marveled at the industry of the natives. Obviously, they had recognized the importance of this city.

A stab of fear caught at her breath. Could they have already found—?

"Storyteller!"

Raazor sounded impatient and she hurried to his side, holding her skirts above the ground. The white gown was totally impractical for this place and scrambling mode of travel, but the Omniscient One had decreed that she wear it for their vows which would take place before these witnesses and 'over' the artifact they had come to find.

The guards cast nervous, farseeing glances toward



those long unused buildings, and back toward the brush from which they had emerged. With a little shiver, Myrilon realized that she, too, had begun to expect someone or something to show in either welcome or anger. But there was nothing, and the silence of the place heightened the small mutterings and hushed curses of the Faerho party.

"What if we are attacked?"

"The Omniscient One will protect us and—"

The conversation between the two Earthkin women died amid short squeals of pain as their owner brought them into line with his whip. Myrilon clenched her hands until her nails dug into her palms. Then silence fell again.

Silence! Quickly, she looked around. Surely there should be insects and animals and birds. The Stories and Tales were filled with reports of such. And any world which supported this kind of vegetation would also have creatures to harbor within the dark spaces, eat of fruit and leaf, and carry out fertilization links between plant and plant. But — she halted.

All the others had also stopped as a sound began to build around them, rumbling in the air, catching at heart and breath of the listener. It was as though one of the great StarVessels had somehow descended to the surface of this world. And somewhere in Myrilon's heart it struck chords of memory...and terror.

Raazor turned a derisive stare on her. "So. They have found it. But come, Storyteller! Come! This is your moment of triumph!"

He strode in the direction of the sound's origin, and she was forced near to a run just to keep pace with him. The others of the group flowed out behind them as they picked a way along one of the avenues and into a cross street where another building showed evidence of restoration efforts.

Like all those around it, it was old and covered with green. Wide, graceful steps — where the tread of many feet had beaten a single path through the ivy to the white stone beneath — led up to a portico and the black opening which was the entrance. And on that high porch, for the first time they could see Earthmen, two Earthmen who stared back for a moment before turning to call within the place. Then they interposed their frail, brightly clad bodies between the new-come strangers and the source of that sound.

The Faerho and their slaves gathered at the foot of the stairs, awed by the sight of the object which sat there in the sun. Rather than merely reflecting the strong, morning light, it seemed to absorb the rays, emitting them from within itself, glowing with a potency that could be felt from a distance.

With Raazor's grip cruel on her arm, Myrilon stumbled upward against that feeling, not daring to look back, sensing nonetheless that only they moved. As they approached, the two Men exchanged a glance. The darker of them nodded, and they stepped back from their awkward pose as guards. Then Raazor let her go and took a final step until he stood on the same level as the box.

The gold artifact, blocky, austere from a distance, now showed the creativity of its long-dead makers: in the abstract reliefs that swirled over the sides; in the

exquisite, fluted fringing that emphasized the corners; in the delicately carved woodwork that framed the top; and in the two patient beings who knelt on the lid, heads bowed, long wings swept gracefully toward one another, features hidden from all.

A heaviness that seemed to accompany the sound from the box settled in Myrilon's bones as she watched Raazor reach tentatively for the gold surface. Then with a movement so swift that the three nearest him cringed away instinctively, he whirled to face his followers, spreading his arms wide. And the serpent, disturbed from its comfortable ride, reared its head, fanning its hood in anger.

"I am Raazor! I am the Great One, the Omniscient, the AllPowerful! Call out the name! Raazor!" His voice rang through the empty city, and many of those below answered his cry. He turned to Myrilon then and laughed. She shivered. "Storyteller, you thought to fool me! To use me! But see! See what I have found! You are not necessary, you and your petty dreams of freedom. What would the Earthkin be without my protection and my care for them? Bow down! Kneel to me, woman! I know you. Oh, I know you, the danger you are."

Slowly, almost lovingly, he unlimbered his own whip, the symbol of power without which a Faerho — male and female alike — did not go into public. And Myrilon, sickened by the knowledge not only of defeat, but also of despair that he had used her so, backed up one step and then halted, unable to move even to protect or defend herself.

With a muffled sound, a word she didn't recognize, the tall brown Earthman near her leapt across the few steps that separated them and wrapped one arm about her shoulders. And now the words — strange and near archaic but for the Tales — became clear. "Are you going to just stand there and let him? Run! Fight! Do something!"

And the other Man turned to call into the building once more.

The whip whistled into the air, but a steady, deeper voice came from that black square. "I wouldn't do that if I were you."

Raazor froze and the leather cracked against the stone steps. Myrilon felt the body beside her sigh with relief. But all she could hear was that voice, and stepping away from the one who had tried to help her, she blinked dazedly at the big, quiet man who moved from the shadows into the light.

He seemed at first to be Faerho, but his golden/brown coloring with its light flush of blood over the cheekbones came from the action of sun and life, not from the calculations of biotechs. His redbrown hair, gilded in streaks by the sun, would never have been allowed even as a flaw. And his features, strong, irregular, marked by the efforts of years, lacked the smooth symmetry of the StarHumans. Then he looked at her, the sun glancing into his deepset eyes, and she gasped at the sight of the gold that flashed to momentary life in the midst of stunning green.

His eyes widened, almost in recognition. He took a step toward her. "You are here! I feared—"

With a swift, gladful smile at her, he returned his attention to Raazor.

The Omniscient One slowly faced him and the sneer had frozen on his features. "You had feared!? I had hoped! But I should have realized that these—" He cast a scornful glance at the two other men. "—could not have found it. Only you...only you..."

The green-eyed man sighed and nodded.

"Do you know who I am?" Raazor said then.

"I could hardly help knowing," the man answered. "You have been announcing yourself to the universe somewhat loudly. And yes, in answer to your question, I remember you."

"No, you remember the one I once was...and am no longer. I am Faerho. And I am the greatest of them!" Raazor glanced at the golden box and back at his opponent. "How did you find it?"

"A year ago I began to dream...strange dreams," the Earthman said, quietly. "I knew you were coming...and that I must find this before you did."

"But once again I take it from you—" Raazor paused. "Who are you now?"

"I am Indas a priest of the followers of Jaawha."

"Indas!" The Faerho began to laugh. "Yes, Indas. And still you speak of this Jaawha! Have you learned nothing in a thousand years?"

"Oh, yes," Indas returned conversationally. He gestured to the city around them. "We have learned not to destroy ourselves or our world. We have learned to restore that which was covered or lost." He turned to Myrilon as if he had heard her half thought/question. "This city was a center of power, and those have been of least interest. Of course, the centers of learning—"

"But you still worship!" Raazor interrupted furiously, his sneer more pronounced. "And you worship my ancestor Jaawha, a long dead Faerho!"

Indas looked to him. "True, he was a Faerho. And true, his physical being ceased to exist long ago. But I can remember a time when your physical being was spread to the winds, like every other on this Earth."

Shaking his head, the other only laughed harshly. "Stand aside, Earthman. I claim this Power by Right of—"

"Don't touch it!"

The Man's swift command halted Raazor, whose black eyes glittered with anger. "I am Faerho. This cannot harm me!"

"But it can...precisely because you are Faerho!" Indas insisted, moving closer. "Raazor, listen to me. We have known each other many times and in many guises. For all those memories — of friendship, of enmity, of brothers, of father and son — listen to me!"

As he paused, waiting, the golden box thrummed mightily.

At last, the Faerho stepped back. "Myrilon, come here."

She hesitated, looking from him to the Man and back

again. Raazor lifted his whip slightly, though only his voice cracked with authority.

"Myrilon, come!"

After another involuntary glance at Indas, she obeyed, moving slowly with her head bowed. Still, she could feel his gaze follow her. Finally, when she stood on the step below Raazor, the Earthman spoke.

"Who are you?"

She met his anxiously questioning eyes and braced herself against the weight of the Omniscient One's hands on her shoulder.

"Tell him, Woman."

"I am Myrilon. The Storyteller of Man."

His face lightened with a kind of astonished joy, as though just from her words he could know of the years of instruction, the dedication, the responsibility that her father had stressed in a thousand ways to her, including by his death, once she had learned all the known Tales and all the secret ones that made up the History of Earth until the Earthkin had gone away and everything that had happened to them since.

Indas bowed, and somehow she knew the obeisance was for her — none for her lord. "I honor you, Storyteller."

"Kneel to me, Earthkin." Raazor's hand pressed down, and wincing, she obeyed while the Man's eyes flashed to a white-crystal clarity in the sun. The Omniscient One smiled at her and then at the Man in triumph. "Now, I will listen."

With his jawline taut in apparent protest, the Earthman glanced at his friends, drawing them to his side. "Raazor, this...ark of power represents an agreement made between our people and our god. The promise was that if we honored him and the rules he set up for our social behavior, he would protect us. And he gave us those commandments a second time, even when we had disobeyed. He told us to build this temple, which he then imbued with his power, and to place the written word within it. And he said that we are...made in his image. So, I believe his power has passed to us. It belongs now to Earth—" His gaze encompassed his companions and Myrilon. "—and to the children of Earth."

Only the humming could be heard. Raazor fingered his whipstock and glanced to his enemies and followers who had begun to climb the steps.

"Do you hear this one, my people?" he shouted down to them. "He thinks the Power belongs to Earth and the Earthkin!" He began to laugh and the other Faerho joined in. And when he halted, their voices ceased as well. "So, Earthman, do you challenge me? You? I have felt this Power...even when I was Man such as you. You cannot—"

"You were too soon," Indas interjected swiftly, leaning toward Raazor in his earnestness. "It was not yet time!"

The Omniscient One looked ugly, his lips stretching away from his teeth in a mirthless smile. "Am I to understand that now — as opposed to then — is the time, and you — as opposed to me — can control the Power?"

The breath rushed out of the Man's lungs and he looked to the box. "I...don't know."

Raazor laughed again, but then a voice spoke from among the Faerho, a voice Myrilon thought she recognized as one of the Tallymen.

"Challenge! Power is challenged! See, now, if Raazor has the strength to lead us! To rule! He is challenged!"

She flinched as the leather whip snaked across the steps to where her lord gathered it in preparation for use. As she looked up, he shook his head violently and lifted the weapon high over his head.

"You shall see! The power is mine!"

Once again, Raazor stepped toward the thing of power and raised both hands over it. In answer, the thrumming increased to a bone-shaking roar and it seemed as if the box would dance on its four, stubby legs. Against that noise, Raazor lifted his voice in the crisp, intricate sounds of the Chant of the Faerho. It marched from his tongue, clapping the air, snapping against the structures around them. And the warning rumble from the box passed into the ground to make the stone steps tremble.

Myrilon stumbled to her feet and pressed hands to her mouth to still a scream as she saw Raazor's face twisted by his hunger for the Power.

"Get away! Run!"

How still and quiet the Earthman's voice seemed in the midst of horror! She saw him push his friends toward the steps. The Faerho were already fleeing in every direction. The two men of Earth went halfway down, paused to wait for their friend. He offered one hand to Myrilon. "Come!"

She stared at him, uncomprehending, and then shook her head, looking to Raazor. The Omniscient One still could make the Power his, and this must be her choice — regardless of what she might want. But the Earthman had seemed so sure. And he knew the secret things which she had never told Raazor.

The marble steps bucked against her feet. She cried out as she lost balance and began to fall that long way down. Then two strong hands grabbed her, held her protectively close to a large, warm body, and instinctively she leaned on him, infinitely grateful for his power.

But Indas thrust her away again, holding her at arm's length, her hands crushed in his. "You know!" he cried, as if the world were not exploding around them. "You know the words. Storyteller! Myrilon, please!"

For one second she glanced back at Raazor. He stood with eyes closed, unheeding of the fury around him as he continued to chant. Then the lid of the power temple began to lift. It settled back. Rose again, wisps of ...something...emerging from within. And gasping with the memory of a time too long ago to be her own, she turned back to Indas.

The ancient words flowed from her mind to her tongue and seemed to pass directly to him, words in the language of the small tribe who had once called themselves the Chosen of God. And had not Jaawha been their

god? According to the Tales, he had guided them, protected them, provided for them. But would he protect his people now?

Together, still chanting, they both looked to the golden box. Now the lid rose steadily, majestically, into the air, held there by beams of light that originated deep inside the opening. Between the columns whirled a never-ending spiral of mist that seemed now to be dancing, flying figures and now merely patterned steps on a double-stemmed ladder that twisted on itself and glowed with the jewel colors of life. Then the colors began to change, one by one, ascending the ladder, splitting its rungs in the center, remolding it to a new and more complex shape.

At last, they finished the chant and stood helpless, awed, as a glow exuded from within that place. Terror followed when the warm, red-gold shimmering enveloped them, entered them, descended deep within to resettle the foundations of being. Myrilon cried out as her fingers were crushed in Indas' grasp. Then the colorglow faded from sight — though not from all sense — and the pillars holding the lid of the box slowly descended, hiding its secrets once more.

In spite of the blazing sun overhead, Myrilon shivered as she gazed at that now innocent gold box. She could feel the tears coursing down her cheeks, and involuntarily, she sniffed, turning to face the man who still held her numb and bruised hands.

He was looking at her, the marks of tears evident on his own face, and he smiled shakily as he loosened his clasp on her, opening his hands to survey her comparatively tiny ones resting within. "I'm sorry."

Wincing at the pain, she flexed her fingers and then saw the small, half-moon indentations where her nails had branded him. "I'm sorry, too."

They both laughed a short, joyous sharing of sound in the midst of awesome silence, but someone moved behind her, and Indas pulled her close with one arm, his gaze going to Raazor.

The Faerho still faced the ark, his eyes closed, his lips moving to unheard words for which there was no meaning. His face had crumbled, though, from within, its facile sculptured beauty forever lost.

"Raazor," said Indas softly. "Raazor, it is done."

The black, dead eyes opened, shifted to them, but remained unfocused.

"You must leave here now, Faerho. There is nothing for you on this world. Leave, and take your people with you. But you must allow any of the Earthkin who wish to, to stay."

The ruler of all the StarWorlds nodded and turned blindly to the steps, descending them slowly, his whip trailing behind him.

Myrilon watched, knowing a kind of sadness for his passing, knowing likewise that the time for such would come also for Man. But for now—!

She turned inside Indas' arm. "The Earthkin! Do not let them go—!"



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But he shook his head. "They must not be forced to stay, Myrilon. Some of them are too comfortable where they are. Others will not understand or believe what has happened here. But the children of Earth will be freed."

She started to protest and then subsided. He smiled, and she saw the golden flame in his eyes; and another memory came to her from beyond her dreams.

"I have loved you...before," she whispered, amazed.

His eyes darkened as he nodded. "And I have hurt you before." He lifted one of her hands and looked down at it. "Worse than this."

She smiled at him and brought his hand to her lips, pressing it to her cheek, kissing the long fingers. "But you have loved me, too, and that has been great. It will be once again."

He looked past her, a dull red painting his cheekbones beneath the golden color of the sun. His arm tightened at her back and he turned her to face outward, away from the ark.

"These are my friends. Kat. Markos. This is Myrilon."

With still a look of awe deep in their eyes, both men grinned and nodded to her.

A blush mounted her own cheeks as she returned the greeting.

The one called Kat turned to Indas. "So...do we take it back with us?"

"Of course," Markos answered. "It's what we came for, isn't it? And now, not even the elders of the temple can say it was wrong to search for it. Every one of Indas' theories have proved right, have they not?"

At last Indas stirred. "Yes, we take it back. But unlike you, Markos, I do not see that the elders will fall on us in complete and unending gratitude. That, however, is for another day. Kat, you go get the ship. I'm glad we hid it this morning. Markos, help me find where the carry-poles went to." He paused, turned to Myrilon. "Would you be able to find something to cover it with? We'd better not take any chances."

She nodded, picked at her own, single-layer garment and then looked to the approaching Earthkin. So few of them had stayed; and so timid they were. Her heart beat

heavily, once, as they looked to her — to her! — for guidance. And one woman wore a splendid purple robe given her by her Tallyman master.

Once the need had been explained, the woman gave the garment willingly, all the while casting awed, frightened glances at the power temple itself. Then as Markos and Indas lifted the now-covered artifact and began to make their careful way down the steps, Myrilon herded the Earthkin together and led them back to the edge of that huge lawn.

A sudden roar sounded from across the river, and the Faerho craft arrowed into the sky and disappeared. As if waiting for that signal, another shining vessel came into view from another direction, sinking silently to the ground before them. Indas and Markos carried their prize to it, placed it inside.

Some of the Earthkin had to be coaxed to board this ship that operated without sound, but at last all settled themselves at handholds in the spacious, comfortable interior. Kat and Markos sat at a slim console beneath a wide window where Myrilon could see buildings and trees receding to make way for sky as Indas led her to a seat on the carpet near the purple-draped ark.

He crouched beside her for a moment, his hands gently cupping her face while he studied her, seeming only now to see her — truly see her. His gaze came to rest on her mouth and he smiled, his eyes only green now with a starburst of brown and gold surrounding the pupil. The gold flared as she stared back — her heart imitating the mighty sound of the ark, and he leaned forward to kiss her, his touch light but filled with promises for the future.

"Welcome home."

†

And their first child was called Shimsallah, he who led the Children of Earth and freed the Earthkin. For the tales continued.

All my life's a circle,
Sunrise and sundown;
The moon rolls through the nighttime
Till the daybreak coems around:
All my life's a circle,
But I can't tell you why;
Seasons spinning round again,
The years keep rollin' by.

Harry Chapin

DREAMS

In dreams I fly on silver wings
Through space to distant worlds.
In dreams I walk
On shores of purple seas.
In dreams I dwell
Under orange skies,
Beside gentle people.
In dreams I live.

MARION McCHESNEY

MY HEART ACHES

My heart aches to see you like this:
Cold and indifferent
You looked at me as if I were not here;
A look so cold, so distant
As if you had forgotten
What we had meant to each other.
Can friendship be so fragile?
I did not believe so.
Let me help,
For a friend is worth all hazards we can run.

THE DIE IS CAST

Lisa Cantrell

I have fought — and believed with a strength
 I little knew in my life before
I have placed my trust in a cause that was new to me—
 yet reflected the ideals I smugly claimed
I had faith in those around me —
 and confidently echoed the zeal within their eyes—
 never looking further than how I could serve best
 what served me

Now where is my strength—
 His strength surpasses

Where is my trust—
 He has shown me perfidity

Where is my faith—
 I hear His mocking voice

And I ask
 Can the vanquished soul be healed?

My strength ebbs and weakness reigns—
 Where once I would have had the will to fight
 I now ask why
What reason can be given for deceit?
You strove to fill me with a power to withstand
 the foe you righteously call Evil
And I tried — God — How I tried
 Yet evil abides

There is no try you say
So Be It!
If my failure to fulfill your dream deletes me from that inner circle
and banishes forever your voice that once led—
There is another Voice—

(Come with Me)

And I ask
Have you left me with a choice?

You say I made my choice—
I placed my friends above your teachings
And for this choice you forsook me — and left me to stand alone
against a Power that was armed with a knowledge you withheld from me

(You cannot win)

Tho now I see the follow of my choice
(the help I so anxiously sought to bring was of no use
and only served to bring me to this end)
That which is done is done
And my eyes have opened in more ways than you can understand—

I have learned so much
I have lost so much
My hopes, my dreams, rivaled your own
And, despite your gentle scoffing of my youthful fancies,
were no less important than your plan for me

For these I fought—
And lost—

And I ask
Are there tears for such things?

I feel the Presence — beckoning, enticing me
to a future I did not seek—
Yet what is left for me?
Lost hopes, lost dreams, lost love,
and now my strength deserts me
I can no longer fight against that Stronger Force
Perhaps no longer do I even wish to—

(You cannot withstand Me)

The shadows filter in — and I rebel
They wane — yet do not retreat — but simply wait
Until my mind flickers its last weak protest
Then silently they resume their insidious probing

(Come with Me)

Then darkness enters and spreads its seductive tentacles
throughout the pieces of my self—
A prelude to that final ingress

(I will make you whole again)

Come then! Come! I cannot withstand You
The die is cast—
Only come — Do not prolong this agony

I am here

I Am

I

My mind reels as the Power fills me
with a force I had no conception of
And I am lost to Him who is now a part of me
as fate ironically made me a part of Him—

In triumph He laughs - (I did know know He could)—
And I laugh with Him
stunned, thrilled by new feelings, new emotions
that engulf me—

The agony is gone
And in its place is a force unleashed - that was always there—
Waiting.

Together We shall rule

Together! Is it not as it was meant to be—
Is this what was foreseen
when I made my choice?

It is you destiny

At last I open my self completely, and
with newfound satisfaction
feel Him slide into my soul—

It is done My Son

We fly above My Self
and I wonder why I fought so long and hard
to deny My rightful place—

Yet, from the vestige of my other self
Perhaps — the last small whimper
of what was
cries out

Ben, why didn't you tell me?

STARSEEKER

A SONNET, BY ROBERTA ROGOW

I thought about a dream, about a thought;
I thirsted to attain and to achieve
The goal in which I only could believe
Against the stale traditions I'd been taught.
I gazed upon the stars, upon the sky.
Considering if I might reach therein,
Or if the very reaching were a sin,
If it were heresy to seek to fly.
I could not stay confined to one small sphere;
A limited existence held no fire.
For me, there had to be a Something higher
Than what was circumscribed by 'now' & 'here'.
And so I touched the stars & held them tight
Trembling with joy, close to the tree of light.

THE OTHER

Marcia Brin

"No. There is another."



The Great Hall was filled with Knights, from masters to acolytes, gathered in small groups. Its walls echoed with the buzz of agitated conversation. The story had spread like wildfire, though it still lacked confirmation from the High Council. But, still—

A small door toward the rear of the Hall opened and Master Jen R'bat, Keeper of the High Seal and thirty years a Jedi Master, slipped in and silently watched the animated discussions. Before he could head for the dais, however, Anori Organa blocked his path. Descendant of the most ancient single line of Jedis, the Talent having been passed from mother to daughter for thousands of years, she was also associated with the powerful Matriarchate of Alderaan, though the women of her branch of the family were barred from the throne so that the Order would have their undivided loyalty. With her was l'Hassor, the only representative of his reptilian species ever to join the Jedi; and Tran N'lann, an old friend from R'bat's native world.

"Have an announcement for us, Jen?" Anori asked.

"Yes, though I'd rather be doing anything else, damn it."

The other three exchanged glances.

"It iss true then? The Ssupreme Grandmasster iss leaving?" l'Hassor eyed R'bat sharply.

The Keeper nodded. There was a long silence, fi-

nally broken by N'lann. "Incredible. To leave, just like that, for...what?"

"For a call of the Force," R'bat answered quietly. "The Supreme Grandmaster is not like the rest of us, Tran. For all his youth — and twenty-two is young in any society — there has never been a Master of the Force such as he. His understanding, his feel for the Force is beyond our abilities. It speaks to him in ways we cannot even begin to comprehend."

"I'll say," Anori commented wryly. "I once asked him what he did, floating alone out there in space in that one-man ship of his, and he told me he was listening to the universe sing!"

The others laughed, but N'lann shook his head. "Jen, where is he going? To enter a warp without the slightest idea where it leads. He may not even end up in this universe, or this time, if he remains there."

"I know, and so does he. Tran, the Force moves with reason. This warp — well, no one else is able to sense it. It opens only for him. He's right; there has to be a reason. And he feels that finding out what it is is important enough to warrant the risk he's taking. I'm not sure that I could do it, my friend, but he is not me. The Force weaves for him pathways we cannot find, and he plans to walk them."

R'bat stared at the dais with unseeing eyes. "I'll miss him," he said simply.



Two figures stood in the small, darkened room off



to one side of the Great Hall. One was the object of all the consternation there: Davor Starrunner, Supreme Grandmaster of the Order of the Jedi Knights — the only being every accorded such an honor, and accounted to be the greatest ever to bear the title, Jedi. Young in years but not in ability, he stood by the window and silently watched the black canopy of night. The moon had not yet risen to lighten the darkness. He was dressed all in black, save for the scarlet inner lining of his cloak and the gold chain, a symbol of his office, around his neck. A lightsaber, black with an intricate golden design, hung from his belt.

The second person, an ancient Jedi Master, who after only a few weeks had declared that neither he nor any other Jedi living could teach anything to the then-pupil Starrunner, now stood on a desk to bring himself closer to Starrunner's height.

"Certain you are, then, youngling?" Yoda asked, his elfin features expressionless as he watched his friend. "No doubts, heh?"

Starrunner turned toward his former teacher. "None. The Force has no beginning or end. It turns in an endless circle. Somewhere on the path there is a great disturbance in its flow. It seeks help to right itself. We are committed to the Force, to tend as well as to use. There is no other choice."

"Good," Yoda said firmly. "Agree with you, I do. But important it is that sure you be." He pushed a large pouch over. "Gold. Always valuable."

Starrunner hefted the pouch and attached it to his belt, near the lightsaber. He seemed to test the air. "Almost time. The flow is charging."

"When you arrive—?"

"I'll have to play it by ear, I'm afraid. The Force will tell me. It is possible that many things will have to occur before I can act." He touched Yoda on the shoulder. "There will be no return; this path goes only one way. It is the only thing I regret."

Yoda sighed sadly. "Yes, youngling, goodbye it is." He hesitated for a moment. "Youngling, for our friendship I speak. The Force is great with you; none of its paths are closed to your step. But cost you much it has."

Starrunner looked up sharply.

"Never a child were you. Youngling, never you laughed. Beautiful is life. When you arrive, if the Force counsels patience, use it. Learn to understand people as you understand the Force."

Yoda paused. "Learn to laugh."

The silence lengthened, then Starrunner spoke. "I will...consider your words, Master Yoda." He stepped back. "It is time. Yoda, I— Farewell." He turned abruptly, strode into an opening in Time and Space that only he could see, and never again was seen in the ancient halls of the Central Enclave.



Starrunner wasn't sure what world he stood upon, but its three moons told him it was not the world he had just left. The instant he had entered this Time and

Space, he had felt an unbearable agony, a distortion in the Force greater than any he had ever encountered. And beyond it, the Dark Side, more powerful than he had believed possible, twisting and unbalancing the Force almost beyond its ability to tolerate it. The galaxy was balanced on a knife edge, teetering precariously. Were there no Jedi to oppose this?

He quickly slid a shield up. There was no reason to alert the Dark Side to the fact that a new player had entered the game. He craved action, but every instinct warned him that it was not yet time to move. For all the distortion, the Force whispered patience. There was no doubt he needed to learn more.

It appeared to be a small port town. With a swirl of his cloak, he headed for the belt area he knew he would find. Every port was circled by one, home to cantinas, traders, small merchants — and a criminal element. If he stayed there long enough, he would learn most of what he needed to know. Provided, of course, he was still in a galaxy that spoke a language he understood. If not, he would have more of a disadvantage than he had anticipated.

A gleam of white caught his eye. The sound of marching feet accompanied a column of bipeds moving in military order, and dressed from head to toe in white armor. Faceless, sexless, they moved with a single-minded purpose toward the landing area. The emanations he received from them told him enough, and he swiftly stepped back into the shadows.



As he watched them moving away, he became aware of someone approaching from behind; still a distance away, but coming up on him rapidly. He remained motionless; someone without his gifts would not have been aware of her approach. In fact, she almost passed him by, but stopped when she saw the armored

figures. He stepped forward to speak to her.

She jumped, and turned to flee, but he caught her arm. Her fear reached him in waves. "Wait, please. I mean you no harm."

Curiosity warred with fear, and the former won. She stopped trying to run. "Who are you?" she asked warily.

Standard! She spoke Standard! Or at least a recognizable variant. So, wherever he was, he was still within the confines of the civilization he knew. Then he heard a sharp gasp and she pulled from his grip.

"A lightsaber! Are you crazy? Here? On an Imperial base?"

Confused, he looked at his weapon. "What is wrong? It is only the weapon of a Jedi."

"There are no more Jedi! And it's worth your life to be seen with that. Ever since the Purge, the Jedi have been outlawed." Suspicion flared in her eyes. "How come you don't know that?"

Stunned, he did not even hear her question. Purge? Outlawed? The Jedi — gone? "The Order," he whispered. "Is there no one left?"

"None. And you didn't answer me."

"I— I've just arrived," he stumbled over his words; he had never told an untruth before. "My home world is at the edge of nowhere. Settled by...Rejectionists," he pulled a name from his past, "and they deliberately cut themselves off from the Republic. I, uh, decided I just couldn't live that way any longer. I really don't know what's been going on in the Republic."

"I'll say. You don't even know that there isn't any Republic any more," she said dryly. "It's been ten years since Palpatine came to power and proclaimed himself Emperor. The Jedi were the first to go. Betrayed by one of their own Order." Her voice suddenly dropped. "Then the Empire took...other things."

He stood, unaware of her grief though it flowed from her like a tangible presence, lost as he was in an agony of his own. Gone. Destroyed. The Order that had been his whole life; the Republic he had sworn to uphold — betrayed. Betrayed. Lost, and he had not been there to fight for them. Or to die with them.

No! Damn it, no! He had told Yoda there was a reason for the call, and now he knew what it was. With the destruction of the Order, those lost to the Dark Side had broken the cosmic balance. The agony in the Force had almost seared him when he first stepped through the warp. It was for him to help correct the distortion.

In that instant before he had put up his shield, he had felt five strong presences, two of the Dark Side, three of the Light. There might have been others, but, if so, their emanations were blocked. Of those of the Light, one he had recognized immediately, though he had thought he would never feel it again. The second he realized belonged to a master of the Force, another of the Order who had survived the Purge along with Yoda, although, understandably, it was an aura unfamiliar to him. And the third: the third was young, very young, and completely untrained. But strong — and important. The

whisperings of the Force told Starrunner that much. The young one would have a part to play, but not yet.

The displaced Jedi realized he would have to draw upon the patience of his training. It was not time, yet, to act. The young presence needed to grow, to learn.

Needed, too, was time to strengthen resistance to the Empire. If the present regime were to fall now, it would not bring back the Republic Starrunner had defended and loved. Until the spirit of the old Republic stirred and fanned opposition into a coherent force, the destruction of the Empire would only pave the way for a new tyrant to rise. Starrunner needed to know exactly who the young one was, and what that one's role would be.

Starrunner would have to disappear. With great reluctance, he removed his lightsaber from his belt and caressed it with his finger. The symbol of all he was, all he believed in. He would have to hide it away. Something in him cried out for action, for attack, but he soothed it into silence. Not yet. One day, but not yet.

Bowing to the woman, he moved out of her path. "I thank you for your patience, tir. I will detain you no longer."

He could feel her curious eyes following him as he continued toward the belt area. It was a good place in which to begin to lose himself. A new name — in case there were still someone who recognized his real one. Idly, he wondered how many years had passed; he would have to find out.

A new life. Perhaps he could sign on as a crewmember for one of the vessels docked here; it would enable him to move fairly freely and to keep in touch with passing events.

The raucous sounds of port cantinas reached him: loud voices and louder music. He smiled. It seems, Master Yoda, that I will have the time to learn those things I do not know. With luck, I will tell you about it one day.



The last rays of the twin suns bathed the vast Wasteland in their dying glow. The great dunes rippled and shifted as the strong winds, harbingers of night, played across them. Save for the whispers of the wind, silence ruled the Wastes and the Sea.

It was the time of day he liked the least. Not the silence; that calmed his soul. No, it was the legacy of the dying suns that disturbed him, a nightly reminder of that terrible day, when the blood of his friends and comrades had run in rivers, and he had left them behind to try and save the future. A future he had guarded for almost twenty years now.

'Crazy Ben', they called him, which was just fine. It kept the curious away and obviated the need to explain why he lived out here, alone. Lately, though, he had felt restless; his soul echoed, he believed, a restlessness in the Force. The feeling was growing, gnawing at him: a great change was soon to occur; perhaps the day for which he had waited was coming at last.

Indeed, the Voice agreed.

It seemed to come from everywhere, but he knew it was riding the wings of the Force. He probed toward it,

but, to his great surprise, found his effort turned aside easily. He had but a brief glimpse of enormous power and an unknown presence before his probe was blocked. Not Yoda. Who, then? And where had such a Power come from, unknown to him?

In time, Obi-wan, came the whisper in his mind. Someday, if the Force is with us, we shall converse at length, my friend.

Why are you here? he asked.

Because events will begin to move swiftly now, and the day of your farewell to Tatooine is approaching. And to let you know that I, too, will be keeping an eye on the young one. His part becomes clearer, his destiny intertwines with one called Vader.

Be ready. The moment comes soon.

Then the presence was gone.

Kenobi stood in thought as the twin suns died and the cloak of night spread across the sky. Only then did he enter his small dwelling.

It was time to prepare.



—Another?

"Yes, yes, Obi-wan," Yoda declared. "Felt him, I did, ten years ago, when he arrived. This is where the warp led."

—The warp...Starrunner!

The Force shimmered with Kenobi's surprise as he recalled the legendary name from the Order's past and its owner's awesome trip to an until now unknown destination.

—Then it was he I spoke with.

"Spoke with?" Yoda asked sharply.

—Once, just before Luke and I left Tatooine. He warned me that the time to move was coming. I could not touch him though; I've wondered ever since who it was. Even now, I do not feel his presence.

"Shielded he is. And great enough his power to keep his presence unknown. Watching the boy is he."

—I wish he had used his gift to keep Luke from going.

NO! A third essence suddenly engulfed them. It is for the best, and thus I will not stop it from happening. He will fail, but he will learn from his failure what he would not let you teach him. When he returns -- and he will -- he will be ready.

The two of them were, as suddenly, alone.

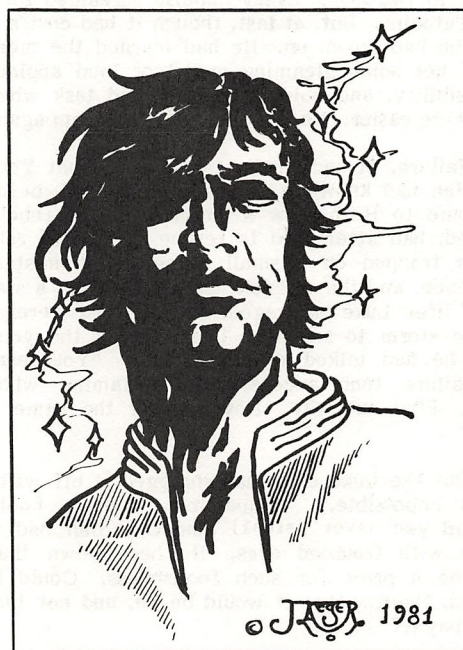


Luke sat still in the cockpit of his small vessel. He desperately wished he could make his ship go faster, but hyperspace was constant. There was no way to attain greater speed. Damn it, if only—

Patience. Hadn't Bespin taught him anything, even

if he had not listened to Yoda? Yes. He had learned at last. The impatient child, the fool, who had made those promises to Yoda — and broken them — and who had ignored the teachings the Jedi tried so hard to give him, was dead. Dead on a lonely catwalk in the heart of a floating city.

But why, why did that damn fool have to destroy so much in his passing? Han. Friend, brother, why did you have to pay? His image rose before Luke's eyes: the boisterous Corellian, always more than he would let others think him, hiding his feelings with a quip, yet always there when Luke needed him. Never fully accepting the 'mystical energy field', though finally agreeing, reluctantly, that there was something — but still refusing to believe it influenced his path. Han was not much for



worrying about deep, philosophical questions. But Luke realized that he had learned as much — more — from Han's common sense practicality, born of great experience with the galactic jungle, as he had from Yoda and Ben. Equally wise was his friend, though it sprang from a different source.

And now, gone. Frozen in time and space, helpless and alone, on a journey to death. His fault. And his...father's. A spasm of hatred passed through him. Calm. Calm. Hate leads to the Dark Side — and one Skywalker had already traveled that path.

Ah, Han, if I had listened to Yoda, perhaps, perhaps...

Leia. He had hurt her, too. And let her down. He had seen her love for Han in her face — and the pain of his loss. Why had he not seen it before? Sitting here, alone, thinking, he had taken a good look at his feelings. He had never loved her as much as Han had; he realized that now. For he had loved an image that had appeared in a small room on a lonely farm, a fairy tale princess,

while Han had loved the real woman. Fairy tales were for children; the man, newly-born in the fires of failure, knew that he and Leia would never have been a match and, in the end, the one thing they did have, a truly close and loving friendship, would have been destroyed. A deep bitterness welled up. And what has caring for me brought you, my friend Leia? The loss of the man you love, the one person whose heart beat in time with yours.

Han, Leia, Chewie, Yoda, Ben. He had let them all down. And had broken his word to the Jedi Master. He had promised he would finish what he started; he had not. Worse still, he had refused to learn while he was on Dagobah. The child, crying "I can't", had closed his ears to the truth. "Can't." How would he know, he who had refused to try?

Well, he was keeping one promise: he was returning to Dagobah. Every impulse screamed for him to go to Tatooine. But, at last, though it had cost a terrible price, he had grown up. He had learned the meaning of honor: not some gleaming medal or loud applause, but responsibility, and holding to duty and task when other paths were easier. No, he would not fail them again.

Failure. It had finally taught him what Yoda could not. Han had known it. Luke remembered, before they had come to Hoth, how a small group of rebels, Luke included, had attempted to rescue a band of rebel supporters trapped on a small planet. But mistakes had been made, and the mission had failed, with a staggering loss of life. Luke had raged, but Han had merely waited for the storm to subside. Then, taking the young man aside, he had talked to him quietly. "You learn more from failure than success, kid. Examine what went wrong. Find out why. Never make the same mistake twice."

But the Luke-child had shrugged it off with another "It's impossible." ("Impossible. Can't." Fool! Fool! Why did you never listen?) The Corellian had watched him go with troubled eyes. He had known that there would be a price for such foolishness. Could he have guessed, though, that it would be he, and not Luke, who would pay it?

Han, please, just hold on! I cannot help you now; I must finish what I have started. But I will come for you, my brother. Wait for me.

Luke Skywalker wept softly — not for himself, but for the innocent victims of his failure — as his vessel slipped silently through the trackless nothing of hyperspace.



She leaned silently against the wall in the shadowed room. The only light came through the glass partition overlooking the hangar bay, and there was not much of that. Only a skeleton crew was on duty at this time of night and most of the lights had been turned off.

The meeting had just ended and she had stopped to be alone with her thoughts before retiring to her room. Strangely enough, she looked forward to sleeping more than waking. The days were desperate, filled with fears for Han's safety. But the nights— She had feared the nightmares, but they had not come. No, at night she slept in a cocoon of comfort. She did not understand and she could never remember her 'dream' — if that were what it was — when she awoke. All she knew was that

something — someone — was reaching out to her, calming her fears, surrounding her in a web of gentle assurance, reminding her that the Rebellion needed all her strength more than ever. At night, she knew there was a friend out there, somewhere.

Gods, if she could only be so sure in the light of day.



He stood, drinking in the sounds of night on Dagobah, watching the swamp glow play across the mist. Hard to believe, but it was over, and he had made it. Graduation day. A Jedi. Once, a thousand years ago, the thought of his being a Jedi would have puffed him up unbearably. But that was the boy; he had changed and grown mightily since then. He had learned that being a Jedi meant greater responsibilities, but did not make him any better than others. The gifts he had been born with were not rewards he had earned, but a matter of luck: he had had the right parentage. Now he would have to prove that he deserved the talents he had been granted by Fate, that he was worthy of being called — Jedi.

He almost had not made it, after all. The first two weeks had been hell, his fear for Han blocking everything else, despite his efforts. Then the Voice had come. A great Power in the Force, he could feel that. Patience, it had counseled. Han would be kept safe until the training was complete.

When he had mentioned it the next day to Yoda, his teacher had assured him the Voice could be believed, but had not explained. Reassured but puzzled, he had thrown himself completely into his training.

He was still puzzled; questions about the new Power were turned aside. In time, Yoda had declared, in time. Well, if there was one thing he had finally learned, it was how to wait; answers would come in their proper course.

It was, at last, time for one thing: Han. This time, though, with Yoda's and Ben's blessing. Grimly, he fastened his lightsaber to his belt.

Yes, indeed, it was finally time for many things.



Lando Calrissian was decidedly uncomfortable. Rescuing was one thing; hanging around Jabba's backyard was another. He knew from long experience that cantina denizens never paid attention to any one individual for very long, but still he felt as if he were the center of attraction. Funny, though, after all those years on Bespin, he wouldn't have thought he'd find anything familiar; yet, it was almost as if he had never left.

He had left, though — and he had come to believe he had lost something in the process, something important. In the old days, he would have conned Han, and stolen his cargo from under his nose, if he could have. But sold him out? Never! Dealt with the Empire? Over his dead body! What the hell had happened on his road to respectability?

And he had gotten himself into one hell of a mess along the way. If Jabba and his henchmen didn't get him, Vader and the Empire would. And if they failed, there was that damn eight and one-half foot Wookiee just waiting to rip him apart. Worst of all, if he survived all

of this, he'd still have to duck the she-krayt Han had chosen to hook up with! Of all the incredible things he had seen lately, this topped everything. Who could ever have seen grow-no-moss, make-no-ties Solo falling for a tiny, tough-minded, strong-willed dynamo who made commitment a way of life?

It wasn't easy, but, behind the grumbling, excuses and self-pity, some part of him had finally come to admit that there was no one to blame for his troubles but himself, and that an old friend perhaps lay dying because of him. Lando Calrissian had never been much for guilt trips, but he had at last come upon one he couldn't duck.

A monstrous bulk suddenly blocked the light. Calrissian forced himself not to jump backward; he knew his survival around Chewbacca was supported only by a tenuous thread. The Wookiee settled onto the opposite bench surprisingly gracefully for one of his size, and Calrissian was sure he was amused by Lando's reaction.

//There has been much luck,// he rumbled. //I believe the little one may not have been harmed yet.//

Calrissian let his surprise show. "In all this time? I can't believe Jabba would hold off."

//That one// — Calrissian shivered at the tone — //has not been here. Things have gone wrong for him in many parts of his "empire". Shipments missing, mysterious explosions, extra-difficult officials. So the little one has been left alone. No one would touch him in Jabba's absence. But, he has returned tonight. We must act.//

"Without Luke?"

//I had hoped he would be here, but we cannot wait. These problems have frayed Jabba's temper; he will be very cruel.//

"Okay, okay. Time is running short. But we can't go without studying the layout a little! It'll be suicide otherwise. And it won't help Han."

There was a long silence, then the Wookiee nodded. Calrissian relaxed. //Tonight we will go out there and observe. And I will ask around for someone with information.//

"They won't help," Calrissian said incredulously. "They're terrified of Jabba."

//Perhaps — in the long run. But, right now, they will be more afraid of me.//

I don't blame them one bit, Calrissian thought bitterly. I am too.

Thus it was that, an hour later, they found themselves several miles from the port, crouching behind a massive boulder, carefully studying the installation before them. Installation, hell. It was a fortified base. Searchlights lined the walls, alternating with electric-eye alarm indicators. There were guards everywhere, and all of them looked dangerous, if not precisely brilliant. Calrissian observed it with a jaundiced eye.

He stiffened suddenly. He'd heard something; he was sure of it. Chewbacca must have heard it too, for he tensed and seemed almost to be sniffing at the air. Then, he gave a low, but pleased, rumble, and headed away from

the rock. Calrissian, turning quickly, saw the figure of a man approaching — before the newcomer was lost in a great, hairy embrace. Curiosity piqued, he moved closer and then, with more than a little surprise, recognized the stranger. Luke Skywalker.

"Hello, Lando," Luke said, in a strangely distant tone.

Calrissian nodded in reply. "Chewbacca explain we're here reconnoitering?"

Luke's face was hidden in the shadows. "We're going in. Now."

"What?" Calrissian was stunned. "Damn, we don't know anything about the layout."

"We don't have to; we're going straight in and out."

"But—"

Luke cut him off. "Your vote is not required. You'll remain here and keep an eye on the 'speeder. Chewie and I will get Han."

His head spun, but he did not argue any further. He did not recognize this man with Luke Skywalker's face. Such a change, in such a short time, from the defeated boy he had seen after Bespin. There was strength and authority in the face before him, and a new maturity. Calrissian merely nodded and said nothing.

"Okay, Chewie, remember to stay next to me. I'm not sure how great a range I'll be able to broadcast over, and there are a lot of guards to block. And whatever you do, don't say anything. No matter what we find. Now, ready? Good. Let's go."

With disbelieving eyes, Calrissian watched them walk toward the gate, shimmer briefly — and disappear! There was another shimmering at the gate itself. He wasn't sure, but he thought it might have opened and closed quickly. Then everything was clear. Not an alarm sounded. Damn, he had heard of the Force, but he had never really believed in it, though he knew Vader could do some strange things. This, though, was incredible!

The minutes dragged on, and each one brought ever-increasing fear of discovery. Suddenly, explosions rocked the night. He jumped to his feet and raced back to the boulder, cautiously peering over it. The warehouse beyond the main dwelling was in flames, huge columns of smoke billowing upward, grey against the black night sky. Figures raced toward the inferno, shouting to each other, some dragging equipment. Only Calrissian, watching intently, noticed the slight shimmer at the gate. He charged back to the 'speeder, slid into the driver's seat and waited. A moment later they were there, the three of them. Han was standing on his feet, but he seemed a little unsteady and Chewbacca had an arm around his shoulders. Calrissian could not get a good look at the Corellian's face.



No one said anything as they got in, and, in an instant, they were on their way, speeding off into the darkness. Only Luke looked back. He had felt it again, that touch of Power, an instant before the explosions went off. A helping hand, creating a diversion. He glanced at Han. A few bruises, at most. Jabba,



returning to his prize at last, had decided to start with a simple beating. The Voice had kept its promise, and Han had been kept safe.

Luke could feel Han smiling at him. "Thanks, kid. All of you. Even you, Lando. And," he said to the driver cheerfully, "to show how much I appreciate what you've done for me, old friend, when I feel better I'm going to beat the stuffing out of you."

Calrissian's protest was stifled by a growl from Chewbacca, and Luke found himself laughing.

Han touched his shoulder. "Leia?" he asked quietly.

"She escaped unharmed, but I haven't seen her since I left for Dagobah. It hasn't been easy for her, but she's tough. And waiting."

Han settled back. "Yeah. So am I," he said happily.



It seemed to have been an omen, somehow, Solo's rescue and Skywalker's return. Suddenly, the Alliance ceased marking time and began regaining momentum. Not immediately, but within a few months it became apparent that the Empire was going on the defensive. Several major engagements proved decisive victories for the rebels. A brilliant raid, conceived and spearheaded by Han Solo (and designed to look like an Empire grab), on a Corporate Sector Authority floating dockyard easily tripled the Alliance fleet — and severely damaged the uneasy alliance between the CSA and the Imperiate. Solo was appointed Admiral of the newly-expanded fleet, much to the amusement of Chewbacca, who ribbed him mercilessly, while Luke, first of the New Order of the Jedi Knights, was raised to a generalship — to the relief of the highly-ranked officers, who felt uncomfortable giving orders to a Jedi. Rebel pilots, who had always been good — a necessity since they were also always outnumbered — benefited nonetheless from Han's tutelage, and Luke's talents proved invaluable in undercover work.

At the same time, Leia was expanding the revolt. No longer content to merely negotiate with planets ready to join the movement, she organized groups to foment rebellion and play on the discontent of the general populace. As long as most were apathetic, the Empire could focus its great strength on a localized rebellion. But, as it spread and the citizenry turned hostile, the Imperiate was forced to spread its troops too thinly to be effective. And so, it lost ground.

But Luke and Vader had yet to meet again.



Starrunner sat in darkness, deep in thought. It went well, yes; very well. The Empire was tottering; it had always been inevitable in the long run: a galactic empire cannot survive without support or, at least, indifference; and a repressive government creates its own opposition. The Rebellion had speeded up the process immensely. Even more, the Alliance had begun to act more like a government, with Leia at its head, than a military command. It would be ready to accept the reins of power when the Empire fell.

Steadily, the paths of Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader moved toward each other. Over the years it had

become increasingly obvious that until the issue between them was resolved, Starrunner would not be able to act. The Force moved in strange patterns and one must follow its dictates. He would have to be ready to act, whatever the outcome of that meeting, though he was hoping mightily for the son to best the father; and at the same time wishing he could spare Luke Skywalker the pain of that victory. But it was not to be, and he would have to exercise all the patience of his training.

And himself? What would he do after it was over? He was not sure, but he knew he could not go back to the same life he had led before. The Jedi had his soul for the rest of his life, but living solely for the Order, as he had before, had cut him off from the rest of the galaxy. And, in these passing years, other things and people had become too important to give up. He would have to find a way to stand with one foot in both worlds.

Soon, soon it would be time.



The final meeting between Luke and Vader came with surprising suddenness. The Empire, in a last-ditch effort to protect its heart, had thrown a large portion of its fleet into a desperate engagement with the Alliance. Fierce fighting raged throughout an entire sector. Except in one small corner, where two ships, the Executor and the Freedom, flagship of the Alliance, faced off.

Like draks challenging for a piece of meat, they stood; their crews each waited, tensely alert, for the other to make the first move. Han, pacing the bridge, was glad he had been able to persuade Leia to stay behind. He had had to couch his arguments in terms of the Rebellion, pointing out that she would be depriving the Alliance of its civilian head, while at the same time taking up space in a straightforward military encounter that would not require any of her talents. Truth of the matter was that he had been concerned about just such a situation as this.

A movement behind him broke his concentration. He turned to see Luke standing there, a strangely remote and uncharacteristically closed look on his face.

"Vader has contacted me."

Han nodded, and was rewarded by a glimpse of his friend breaking through the stranger's mask.

"You don't seem very surprised," Luke said, a smile flitting across his face.

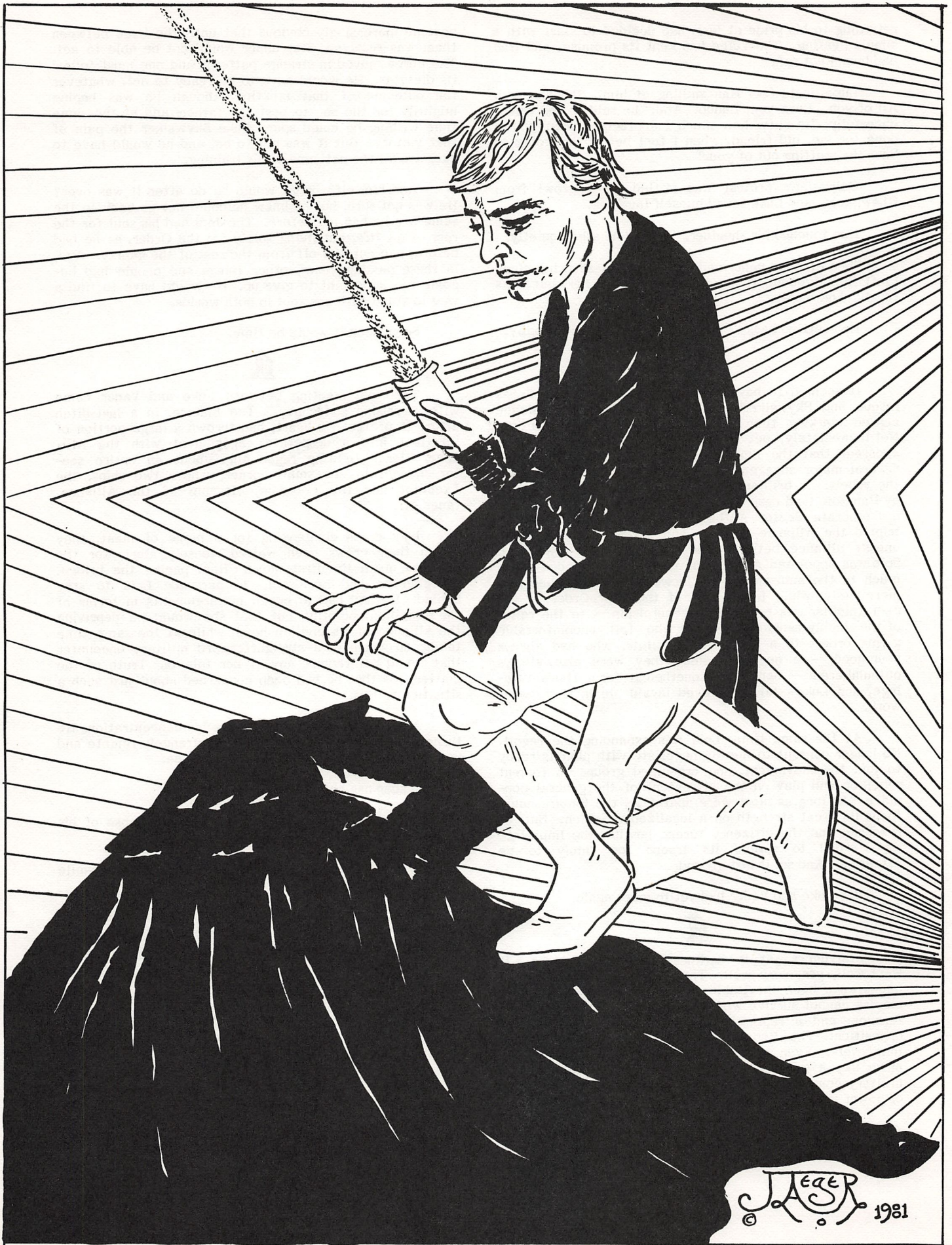
"Corellians are never surprised," replied Han lightly. "Besides, I figured he'd try to do something like that. There had to be a reason why he hasn't made a move out there. What'd he want?"

"To meet me. Down there." Luke gestured toward the small planet they hovered near by.

There was a moment's silence. "Are you going to go?" Han asked quietly.

"There was never any other choice, never any other path. One shuttle of ours and one of theirs."

"Forget that. We'll take the Falcon. It's got greater speed and more fire power."



He moved to the communications panel. "Open channels to the Executor," Solo ordered.

"We have you on beam." The voice of the Imperial radioman was slightly distorted.

"As Lord Vader already knows, we accept his proposal. One shuttle, and one only, will go from each ship. If any other shuttles, or any fighters, attempt to leave the Executor, they will be fired upon." Han gestured to close the channel.

A short while later, the Falcon gently disengaged herself from the belly of the Freedom and headed swiftly toward the planet beneath her. From her cockpit, Han could see a shuttle falling away from the Executor on a parallel course. He had hoped to arrive first, so that Luke could pick his ground, but it appeared they would touch down at the same time.

Even before the dust of the landing had cleared, Han was scanning the other ship. "One life form," he announced. "It seems he came alone."

Han and Chewbacca could not hear what passed between father and son as they stood facing each other, only a few feet apart, yet across an unbridgeable chasm. Then, with an explosive suddenness, the final battle began.

He hovered there, in that universe beyond the universe that only he had ever had the power to enter, where the lines of the Force crossed and wove themselves into a glowing golden web on which hung colored jewels that marked the essences of the Force-sensitive. If he swooped down, he knew that the gleaming threads would become golden roadways bordered by strange, unknown landscapes. One day, perhaps, he would leave the path and walk one of those alien universes. But not now, not yet.

There. Drawing his attention were three larger glows, masters of the Force. Luke Skywalker's blue-white, Vader's red -- and behind them both, a great dark presence, a shimmering blackness he now knew to be the Emperor. His own glowing gold he kept carefully shielded.

He watched as gleaming strands of the Force were pulled toward, and absorbed by the combatants. Though spectators below would see two men engaged in a lightsaber duel, to him it was a battle of power in which blue-white and red bolts were hurled back and forth. The battle raged fairly evenly for some time; then, suddenly, he could feel a change: Luke Skywalker had gained the upper hand.

Below, a blond warrior, with bold determination and grief in his heart, swung his lightsaber in a killing stroke

the blue-white presence, grown suddenly larger, gathered whole webs of the Force to itself

and the lightsaber slipped past Vader's guard and sliced through muscle and bone

as great bolts of blue-white fire, forming almost a solid sheet of power, engulfed and ripped apart the opposing presence, which died with a swirl of red flame that slowly faded

and a son wept softly over the body of his father.

Starrunner dropped his shield. Now. At last. Free

to act, to play out his part of the pattern. The dark essence that was the Emperor became aware of his presence too late, only a scant instant before the blazing golden fire, soaring through the web of the Force, slammed a spearhead of light into the shimmering blackness and destroyed it. And as it died, he could feel the cosmic balance springing back into equilibrium and hear the Force singing as it flowed freely on its path.



The X-wing stood beside the small dwelling, looking somehow lost and forlorn in the slashing rains of Dagobah. Swamp and jungle lay silent beneath the torrent, their inhabitants having sought refuge.

Inside the shelter, though, it was dry and warm. Luke sat near the fire, trying to converse with Yoda, who paced back and forth.

"No, no," the Jedi master grumped, shaking his walking stick at Luke, "go I will not."

Luke sighed. "Master Yoda, they would come to meet you, but there is no place for a large shuttle to land. The New Republic has been formed -- and the New Order -- and they wish to honor you."

"Feh, honors. Still learn you nothing? A Jedi craves not honors or applause."

"I'll have to add those to the list," Luke said wryly. "If you keep going, we'll be lucky if our poor Jedi are allowed to need bathrooms."

Encouraged by a twitch of Yoda's lips, he leaned forward and spoke earnestly. "I do not speak of medals or applause, Master. But the admiration and affection of the people and Republic we have sworn to defend; surely this is a precious gift and not to be scorned?"

Yoda watched him in silence for a moment, then he smiled. "Wrong was I, youngling," he said softly. "You have learned well, very well." He sighed and looked around his dwelling. "Come with you I will. But for a short time only, heh?"

Luke smiled, pleased, then glanced at the windows. "We can't leave until the rain stops. I will tell you about the New Order, Master. It grows apace."

Nodding, the ancient Jedi settled down to hear about his Order's rebirth.



It was a grand celebration, and well it deserved to be. Yesterday they had gathered in silence to mourn their dead, all those gallant souls who had given their lives to the conflict. But today it was a time to throw off the past and celebrate the future -- and rebirth. The massive hall was thronged with people. It had been the seat of the Old Republic Senate, here on Devan, and tomorrow it would become the heart of the New Republic. Zytal, the capital of the Empire, had been razed and would be left that way, empty and desolate, to stand as a warning against complacency.

Yoda had been having a good time, though he would not admit it to Luke, to whom he had grumpily muttered something about wasting time. He had been enchanted by the regal Princess, had been greeted by hundreds (it

seemed) of people, and had bumped into a tree trunk that turned out to be the leg of a Wookiee. It had been a long time since he had met one of the People and he conversed with the great being for some time.

After a while, though, he became aware of... someone. He stood in thought for a moment, then quietly slipped out the great doors and started down a corridor. There were dozens of rooms in the Senate building, and the hallways were a veritable maze, but he moved without hesitation. Eventually he found himself in the deepest recesses of the structure, standing just outside a large, darkened chamber. Silhouetted against the window was a figure.

"Heh, youngling, so here ends the path," Yoda said, peering into the darkness. "Good it is to see you again."

"And you, old friend," the figure replied. "The years have treated you well; you seem unchanged." He chuckled. "Not a day over four hundred and fifty!"

Yoda looked surprised, then he smiled. "Not wasted the years have you. In more ways than one."

"Indeed not, my friend. I took your words to heart." There was the soft sound of a cloak swirling and a glimpse of scarlet as the figure started toward Yoda and the lighted hallway.

"Much to talk about there is. I will tell you of the last four hundred years of the Order."

"And I, Master Yoda," Han Solo said cheerfully, "will tell you how I learned to laugh."

Jenny McLean

THE SIGN OF THE REBELLION

The sign of the Rebellion
burning (brightly) in the darkness
like a light showing the way
for the wayward travellers

The lightsabre
is held by one so small
but like a flower bright and beautiful
grows and the Jedi are born again

cold...
penetrating...
deep...
no...resist...
i can't do it...
another step...another step...

then i see a light —
Ben? Ben?
dare i believe it...
why did I say Ben?

COLD

It is Ben —
but i can't reach him —
he won't reach me —
fuzziness is edging into my soul...

Dagobah?...i have to go to Dagobah...
slowly...i'm beginning to slip...
though Dagobah rings through my consciousness...
...the cold...it's so cold...
Ben —

CAUGHT BETWEEN

young rebel soldier
faltering, floundering in the snow
desperate actions
as he runs from death

finding no life in the stark whiteness
as he stumbles along just in front
of the grey steel of terror —
retreat, retreat — to where?

the Rebellion now scattered
where was he to go
alone he stands
while the Empire relentless moves on.

winning hard fought ground —
rebel freedom encroached upon with every
day
but the young one remains determined...
One day the Empire will be the one to
flounder in the snow.

TESB: THE MUSICAL?

anonymous

GEORGE:

Just when you thought it was safe to come to a Michicon banquet...

(Jaws Theme — on kazoos.)

...because all the raunchy post-banquet skits and shows had to have been done already...

Well, forget it! Get out your barf bags, folks, because Tacky Tacky Productions presents the Dagobah U class of '73 Senior Class play:

(Everyone turns around, revealing backs of shirts that say 'Dagobah U'.)

(SW fanfare — on kazoos.)

TESB: The Musical?

('Music' continues.)

Space, the final frontier. These are the voyages of the star— Oops. Wrong movie.

(Pause, deep breath.)

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, it is a dark time for the Rebellion — not to mention MediaWest... con. Although the Death Star has been destroyed, Imperial troops have driven the rebel forces from their hidden base and pursued them across the galaxy. Evading the dreaded Imperial Starfleet, a group of freedom fighters led by Luke Skywalker...

(LUKE steps forward and bows.)

...has established a new secret base on the remote ice world of Minneso— oops, I mean Hoth.

('Music' stops.)

The evil Lord Darth Vader...

(VADER steps forward and bows.)

...obsessed with finding Skywalker, has sent thousands of remote probes into the far reaches of space...

(PROP-PERSON enters with pin-up of Imperial Probe Droid.)

EVERYONE
(to "Frosty the Snowman")

The Imperial Probe Droid has landed here on Hoth; It's looking for the rebel base that the Imperials want Luke sees it landing, and goes to investigate; Gets dragged round by the Wampa; its dinner is his fate.

GEORGE:

And so we find our young hero hanging around his host's icebox looking like a slab of Choice Grade A Prime.

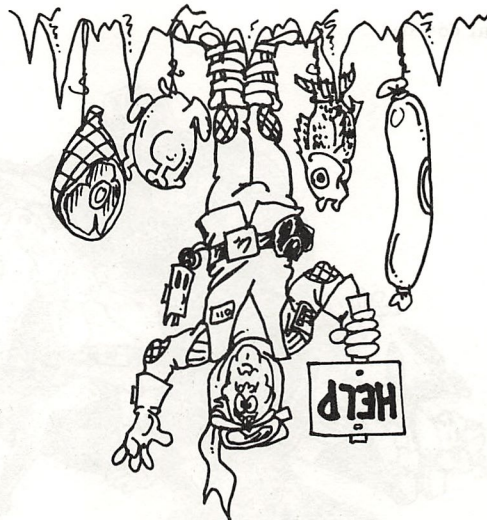
PROP-PERSON:

Will everyone please stand on their heads? This is the special effects part.

(PROP-PERSON holds up Luke's scarf.)

LUKE:
(to "Help!")

When I was younger, so much younger than today,
I never needed anybody's help in any way.
But now those days are gone, I'm not so self-assured;
Ben, I know I need you like I've never done before:
Help me if you can, I'm upside down
And I would appreciate your being round.



Help me get my feet back on the ground
Won't you please, please help me!

GEORGE:

Don't worry folks. This is only the beginning of the movie. Of course Luke gets rescued! Okay, Han, rescue Luke!

(HAN enters; tries to pick up LUKE, but can't. He yells for PROP-PERSON, who takes a look at Luke, shakes his head 'No way' and signals Luke to move under his own power.)

GEORGE:

Meanwhile, back on the Executor...

EVERYONE:
(to "Battle Hymn of the Republic")

Mine eyes have seen the coming of the Dark Lord of the Sith
He is killing all the admirals; their efficiency's a myth
He has noosed his faithful followers; he cut their pay a fifth
The Empire marches on...

GEORGE:

...and on...and on.

VADER:

Admiral, have you found those rebels yet?

PIETT:

Uh, I think they went thataway, sir!

VADER:

After them, you fool!

(LEIA is pushing HAN offstage; they are both pursued by VADER and PIETT.)

LUKE:

Now what do I do?

BEN:

You will go to the Dagobah system.

LUKE:

Dagobah system?

BEN:

There you will learn from Yoda, the Jedi Master who instructed me.

EVERYONE:
(to "She's Leaving Home")

Wednesday evening at five o'clock as the battle ends
Silently slamming his X-wing door
Heading for Dagobah, not knowing what for,
He flies out into the system, taking his R2 droid.
Turning his back on the rebel base,
Saying, "I gotta get out of this place,"
He (Leia's with Han, does he know?)
Is leaving (Vader is pissed, does he know?)
Hoth (Leaving that god-awful planet behind).
He's leaving Hoth (Bye, bye).

(Everybody waves.)

GEORGE:

So Luke flies to Dagobah. (PAUSE) His flying is terrific, but his landings leave a lot to be desired.

(R2 screams - kazoo effect.)

LUKE:

Oh, shut up, R2! (PAUSE) R2, that way.

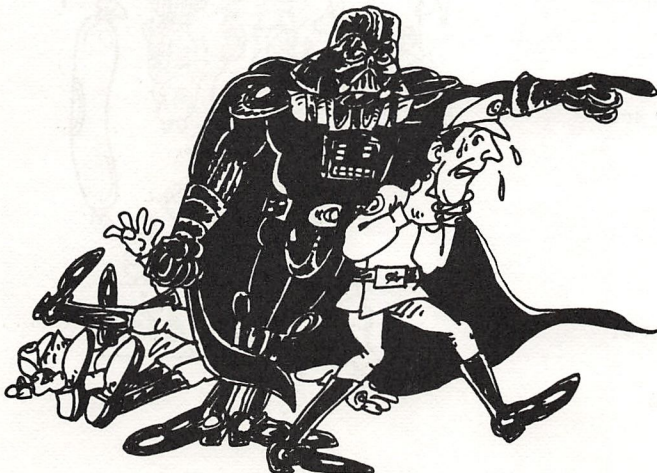
(Yoda is on other side of stage, waving. Luke approaches, stops and looks above Yoda's head.)

LUKE:

Where in hell am I gonna find a Jedi Master?

YODA:

No respect I get.





(to "The Rainbow Connection")

Half asleep have you been
And voices have you heard?
I've heard them calling your name.
Is this the Force sound that calls the young Jedi?
My voice might be one and the same.

GEORGE:

Switch scenes — quickly!

HAN:
(to "I'm Flying")

I'm flying (flying?)
Look at me, way up high
Through an as'troid belt I fly,
I'm flying.
I'm flying (flying?)
I can zoom, I can soar;
And what's more,
I'm not even trying.

High up and in flight as I can be,
Imperial destroyers can't catch me.

I'm flying (flying?)
Nothing will stop me now,
Cut in hyperdrive; look at how
I can beat them sound —
Oops, don't look around —
I'm flying.

(SPOKEN, to Leia:) Aren't you impressed?

LEIA:

Not particularly.



You've heard it too many times to ignore it;
It's something that you're s'posed to be.
And you have found it,
The Jedi connection;
The reptiles, the dreamers and me.

(Yoda pokes Luke in the kneecap with his stick.)

LUKE:

Who the hell are you?

YODA:
(looking to sky)

Ben, where did you find this one?

BEN:

Tatooine.

YODA:

That figures!

GEORGE:

Meanwhile, back on Dagobah, Luke is trying to learn about the Force. That boy is definitely trying.

LUKE:

This isn't easy, is it?

YODA:

Bad you think you got?

YODA & LUKE:
(to "It's Not Easy Being Green")

YODA:

Easy it's not being green;
Easy it's not being master of the Force on Dagobah
And teaching pupils who have no patience
And are too old to learn.

LUKE:

It's not easy being dumb.
What's the point in raising rocks?
And if he wanted me to get the X-wing out of the swamp
He should've told me how.

YODA:
(spoken)

You never asked.

LUKE:

A Jedi's path is hard to follow;
It could make you wonder why, but why wonder, why
wonder—
A Jedi is what I want to be—

YODA:

And you will be...
I should live so long!

GEORGE:

Back on the Millennium Falcon:



HAN:
(to "Cheek to Cheek")

Bespin, goin' to Bespin.
My hyperdrive won't work and let us flee
And the Empire is chasing after me
So we'll duck those TIEs in asteroid 23.
Bespin, we're on Bespin.
Lando's making eyes at Leia, and I see
That the dinner is a trap to snare us three;
Boba Fett is there and now the joke's on me.

GEORGE:

Let's see what Lukie is doing now.

(BEN is holding onto LUKE's arm; YODA, to his leg.)

LUKE:

But they're my friends. I have to rescue them!

BEN:

How are you going to fight Darth Vader?

LUKE:

Huh?

EVERYONE:
(to "How Do You Solve
a Problem Like Maria?")

How do you solve a problem like Darth Vader?
How do you beat a Sith who's mean as hell?
How do you make him stay
And listen to what you say?
How do you get the cat to wear the bell?

GEORGE:
(spoken)

Who the hell is going to bell this cat?

EVERYONE:

Oh, how do you solve a problem like Darth Vader?
How do you kill a Dark Lord of the Sith?

GEORGE:

Very carefully. (PAUSE) Will Luke arrive in time to rescue his friends from danger?

HAN:
(screams)

NO!

(to "How Do You Do It?")

Why do you do what you do to me?
If I only knew.
Wish I knew how you do it to me,
But I haven't a clue.

You give me a feeling up my spine
Like a grid scan passing through it.
S'pose that you think you're very fine,
But won't you tell me why you do it?

Why do you do what you do to me?
And to Leia, too?
If I get out of here
I'll be sure that I do it to you.

(DARTH and PIETT are chortling between themselves. VADER grabs HAN unceremoniously by the neck and dumps him next to Leia, then goes offstage.)

HAN:

I feel terrible.

LEIA:

(to "I Honestly Love You")

Maybe I hang around you
A little more than I should;
We both know we've got somewhere else to go.
But I've got something to tell you
That I never thought I would,
And I believe you really ought to know:
I love you;
I honestly love you.
You don't have to answer;
I see it in your eyes.
Maybe it was better left unsaid—

HAN:
(spoken)

I know.

LEIA:

But this is pure and simple,
And you must realize
That it's coming from my heart and not my head:
I love you;
I honestly love you.

(Through the song, cast comes forward, one at a time, until Han is surrounded. After song, everyone points finger: "Zap!" HAN sinks to floor, frozen.)

LEIA:

I hate cold han(d)s.

(PIETT points finger into LEIA's back and leads her offstage. HAN remains on floor. LUKE sneaks onstage.)

LUKE:

Vader, where are you?

(VADER is on other side of stage, swinging his lightsaber.)

VADER:

Over here, turkey!

(They cross lightsabers — plastic, store bought. HAN is still lying in the middle of the floor, between them.)



HAN:

Halt!

(Han picks himself up and walks offstage. Then saber duel commences to "Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairies" — on kazooos!)

GEORGE:

Fred Astaire, they ain't.

LUKE:

Who's Fred Astaire?

(VADER grabs Luke's hand)

Unhand me, you fiend.

(VADER shrugs; swings saber and cuts off Luke's hand.* LUKE SCREAMS.)

That smarts!

VADER:

I never had the chance to spank you when you were a child.

LUKE:

What are you talking about?

VADER:

Luke, I am your father.

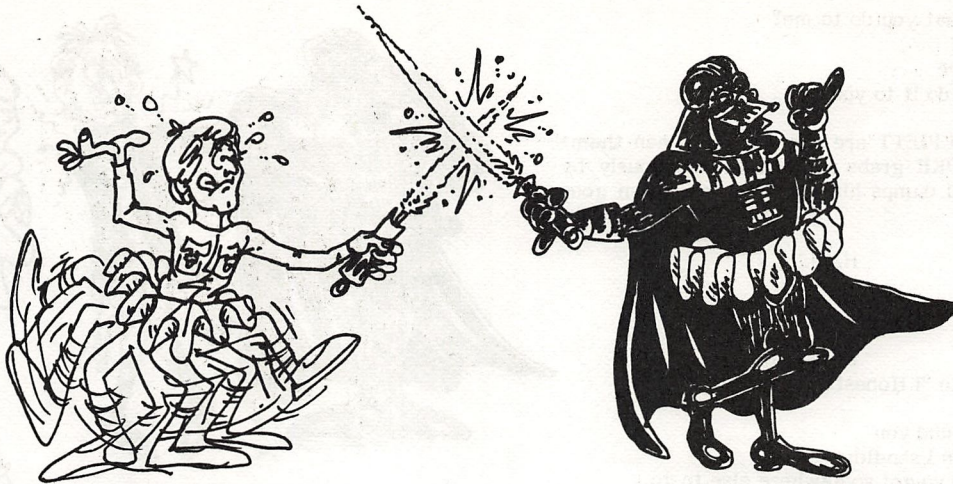
LUKE:
(long pause)

Naaaahhhh!

VADER:

Yes, yes.

*An anonymous attendee yelled out "That was underhanded!" at this point. We'll get said attendee for this; we should have thought of it first!



LUKE:

No, no.

VADER:

You're just like me.

LUKE:

How?

VADER:

You're a klutz, aren't you?

LUKE:
(in horror)

No!

VADER:

Join me, Luke, and together we can rule the galaxy as father and son.

LUKE:

No.

VADER:

Why not?

LUKE:

No.

VADER:

Son, you are being repetitive. You have to make a decision...now.

LUKE:
(pauses, thinking)

Okay.

(LUKE jumps off front of stage.)

VADER:
(shrugs)

Well, you win some, you lose some.

(VADER walks off stage. PROP-PERSON enters and hands GEORGE a piece of paper.)

GEORGE:

We interrupt our program for this bulletin: the residents of Bespin are complaining about rotten TV reception.

(GEORGE, shaking his head, walks offstage.)

LUKE:
(to "He's Not Heavy, He's My Brother", and then "Help!")

The road is long, with many a winding turn
That leads us to who knows where, who knows where.
And I know that he will encumber me:
He's the heavy; he's my father.

If I'm laden at all,
I'm laden with sadness
That Ben Kenobi lied...

(SPOKEN:) Ben, why didn't you tell me?

And now my life has changed in oh so many ways;
My independence seems to have vanished in the haze.
I've got a daddy that I totally abhor.
I've lost my hand and need you, Ben,
Like I've never done before.

Help me if you can, I'm upside down.
And I would appreciate you being round;
Help me get my feet back on the ground.
Won't you please, please help me?

(SPOKEN:) Ben, are you listening?

BEN:

No!

LUKE:

Leia, are you listening?



(LEIA comes onstage and leads LUKE off.)

LEIA:

Why me, Ben? I'll get you for this.

(VADER AND PIETT come onstage.)

VADER & PIETT:

Curses, foiled again!

(VADER and PIETT stomp offstage.)

GEORGE:

Meanwhile, on the hospital ship, Luke and Leia say good-bye to Lando and Chewie.

(LUKE tries to put arm around LEIA. He finds she's too tall, and yells for PROP-PERSON, who brings out stool. Luke climbs onto stool, puts arm around Leia. Together, they look mourn-

fully out at audience.)

EVERYONE:
(to "Happy Trails")

Happy trails to you
Until we meet again.
Happy trails to you;
Get Han thawed out by then.
Happy trails to you
Till they film Revenge!

GEORGE:

Wait a minute, folk. There's still a bit more.

(Entire cast links arms.)

EVERYONE:
(to "When You Wish Upon a Star")

When you wish upon a star
Make sure you know where you are.
When you wish upon a star
Your dreams come true.

Luke wants to get his old man;
Leia's looking for her Han;
Chewie wants his partner back,
And Lando, too.

If your heart is full of dreams,
Don't get caught in rebel schemes.
The Empire is after them;
They'll get you, too!

(EVERYONE points at audience.)

THE END
(Thank Ghu!)



secret musings

I stand beside your command chair...

A Vulcan...cold, impersonal...and to all
external indications — unemotional.

Yet as I observe even your daily routine
you can never know what is in my mind.

You can never know the pride I have in our
achievements together...nor the terror I
feel when you are in danger.

You have taught me what the word friendship means
and how it feels to belong.

You have changed my life and the way I interpret
my Vulcan heritage.

Perhaps being part human is not so bad a thing
after all.

For that realization I am also grateful.

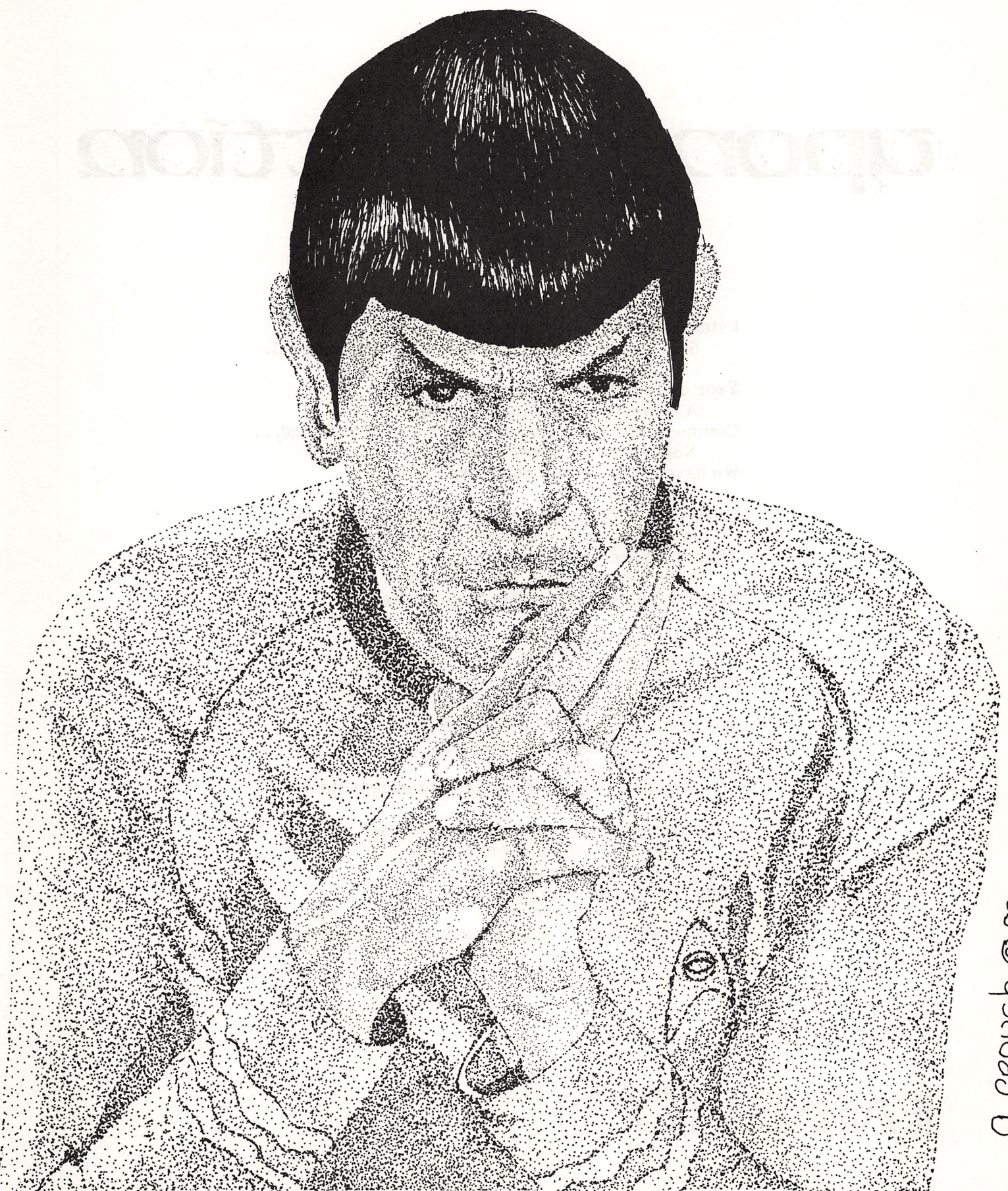
So many things have passed between us.

So many things I would like to tell you...
to share with you.

But I can't... It is not my way.
So I remain silent and hope you know.

And somehow I think you do.
For it is part of what we are to one another.

Jeanne Cloud



A. CROUCH © 82

upon reflection

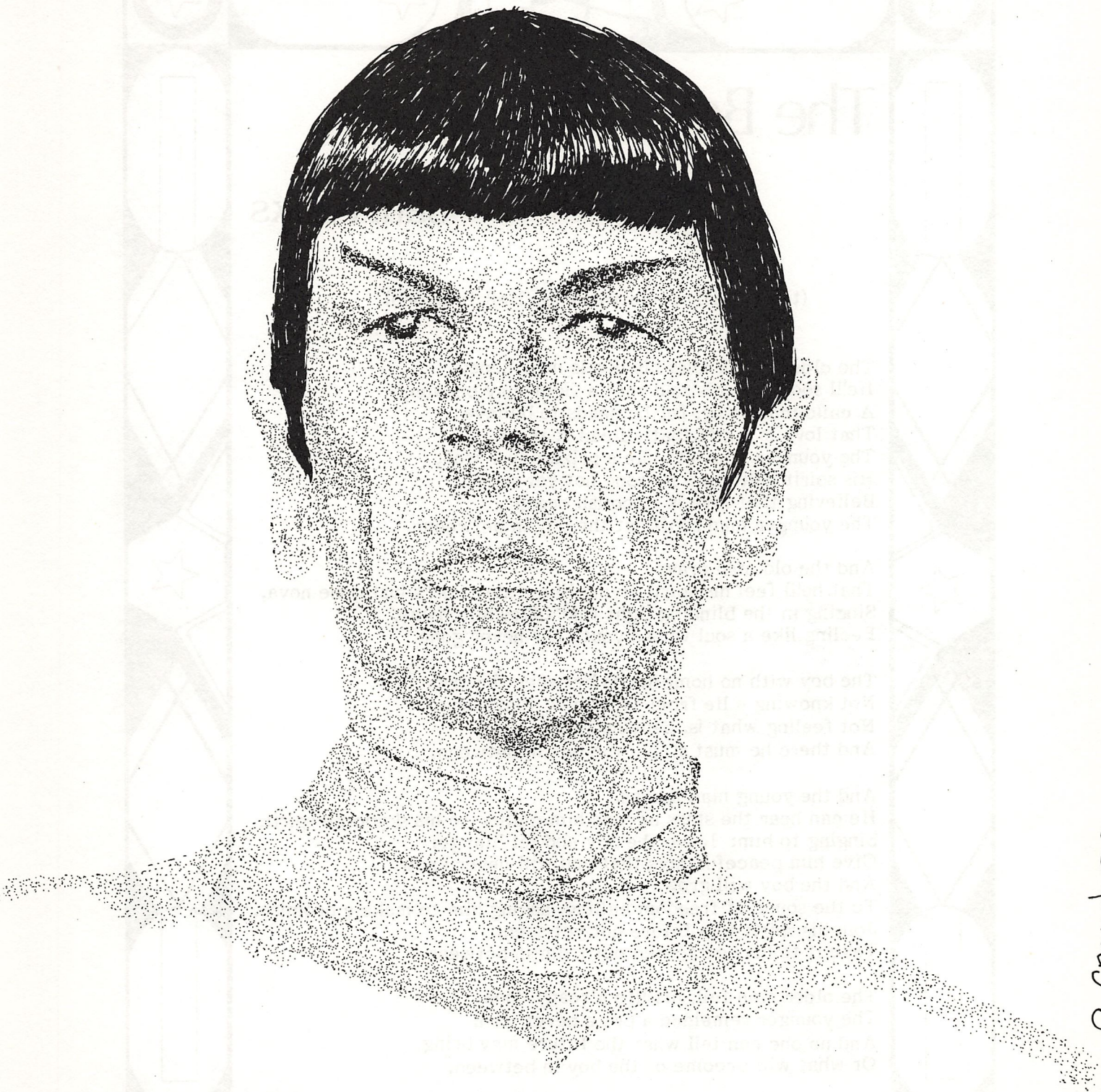
I stand again beside your command chair
Still a Vulcan...but not so cold or unemotional.

Your daily routine is different now
A new ship...mostly new crew.
Command sits upon your shoulders as an old friend...
Not like a new jewel as before.
We have been through much my friend,
my t'hy'la.
I still feel pride in our achievements...and terror
in your danger...or death...and love.
They were previously unvoiced.
V'ger was, perhaps, the catalyst
But the feelings were there long before.

I said you had changed my life.
Even then I did not realize how much.
Perhaps that is what drove me back to Vulcan.
I could not bear to be on that ship when you left.
The Kohlinahr was to be my salvation...
It was almost my destruction.
YOU are my reality.
Why has it taken me so long to accept this?

The things that have passed between us...
I could not talk of them before.
The giving was difficult...then.
I can remain silent no longer.
Come...share with me
For it is still a part of what we are to one another.

JEANNE CLOUD



A. Crouch © 82



The Boy in Between

Jani Hicks

(to "The Boy in Between" by Neil Diamond)

The older man knows his life is near done;
He'll soon give his soul that a fight may be won.
A child in his way, for he needs to believe
That love is a gift that all can receive.
The younger man sits like a prize never won,
His spirit unlit, and its song not yet sung,
Believing that love is a foolish dream,
The younger man scoffs at the boy in between.

And the old man prays
That he'll feel his spirit flying like a star that's just gone nova,
Singing in the blinding light that takes him home,
Feeling like a soul whose youth has never gone.

The boy with no home waits between the two,
Not knowing a lie from something that's true,
Not feeling what is, denying what's seen;
And there he must stand, the boy in between.

And the young man laughs.
He can hear the stars beyond him calling to his skyborne spirit,
Singing to him: leave the boy and let him go;
Give him peaceful days that you will never know.
And the boy will grow
To the sound of freedom calling, asking him to make a promise,
Join his spirit to a future not yet seen;
Take it to his heart, step out from in between.

The older man fell, his life already done.
The younger remained a prize never won.
And no one can tell what the future may bring
Or what will become of the boy in between.

NOMADS OF FATE;

NOMADS OF CHOICE

Carol Mularski

A "Desert Seed" Story

"Just one. . . more. . . twist. There!" Exhaling sharply, Joel Zeke pushed his chestnut hair out of his eyes, recovering from screwing the last, stubborn bolt into the support structure of the vaporator. He tossed the screwdriver to his twin brother, Terry, and jumped down from the stepladder.

Terry put the tool in the small metal chest at his feet on the sand, and folded up the ladder. Then he joined his brother in gazing proudly at the three late-model vaporators they'd just finished installing on the South Ridge, part of the Tatooine farmstead they'd inherited from their maternal grandfather, Owen Lars, the year before.

"I sure hope you're right about these vaporators paying for themselves quickly," Terry commented. "We're in debt bad enough as it is."

"Trust me, Ter'," Joel said. "If you want to get ahead in this business, you've got to be willing to make a few capital investments."

"Yeah, I know. But I'm a little nervous. We spent all Grandpa's savings getting the pit livable again and repairing the old vaporators. I don't like being in debt to Dad and the Bestine Loan Institute on top of it all. And with the girls in the family way. . ."

"You always were a worrier. C'mon, Terry, have I ever let us down?"

"Sure. When we were ten years old, you—"

"Forget I asked." Joel picked up his calibrator and

ran a final check on the vaporators' self-maintenance systems. Shaking his blond head, Terry made some minute adjustments in the antenna mechanism which received its microwave power from the farmstead's solar generator.

"It's good these things are self-maintaining," Terry said after a few minutes, trying to sound more optimistic. "It'll give us more time to keep the older vaporators running."

"We'll give these a good check-up once a month or so — that should be enough." Turning off the calibrator, Joel continued thoughtfully. "With luck, these can give us a bit of a water surplus to sell on the open market. Aeslyn and Elci can keep an eye on the hydroponics. And if Elci follows through on her idea of opening a tailoring shop in Anchorhead. . . well, we'll be rolling in credits!"

Terry nodded. He and Joel had gone over their plans many times before, but it was still reassuring to hear them. Completing his task, he set the timer on the forcefield that repelled scavengers, while Joel stowed the equipment in the back of their new landspeeder. The twins hopped in, Terry in the driver's seat, and sped over the desert toward home, about five minutes away.

"Aeslyn mentioned to me last night that she'd like to keep kelas, and sell the honey from them," Terry said. "We could convert the empty storage room for her to raise the bugs in. What do you think?"

"Sounds like a good idea. As soon as we pay off the vaporators, we'll look into getting the equipment for her." Joel grinned at his brother. "You know, it seems so simple, making a go of this place. I wonder why Grandpa

just barely scratched out a living here?"

Terry's mouth turned down at one corner. "Grandpa wouldn't use science, Joel. Remember when we tried to tell him about the new vapo-technology? And he wouldn't let Grandma do anything but work around the farmstead, even though she could've been teaching in Anchorhead. The old boy just wasn't for anything new or different."

Joel nodded. "I guess you're right — never figured it that way before." He snorted. "Besides, just think of the 'wonderful' help he had."

"Yeah. Uncle Wynn had to run off and get himself killed, just because he couldn't stand any machines except computers. And Luke was worse than useless. All he wanted to do was buzz around in that damned 'hopper of his and pretend to save the galaxy. I swear, if he ever entered a daydreaming contest, he'd win hands down."

Joel joined his brother in derisive laughter. They had been contemptuous of their mother's young cousin since childhood. Even their gratitude to Skywalker for giving the farm to them had done little to temper it.

Joel and Terry Zeke had grown up on a Tatooine water station near the tiny north polar ice cap, learning to be ecology technicians, like their father. But during periodic visits to their grandparents' home, Owen, Wynn and Luke had taught them how to operate the moisture farm's equipment. The twins had enjoyed the tasks, and had been even more fascinated by their grandfather's talk of how to manage the farm and make a profit. Owen had been delighted to find that his grandsons were honestly interested in his work. No one else in the family, except for Beru, had seemed to care very much.

By the time the twins had reached late adolescence, they'd been sure they wanted to be partners on their own moisture farm, rather than go into public service like their father, Randal Zeke. Making the desert environment more bearable for their fellow Tatooiners was well and good. . .but making a profit for themselves was much more attractive.

When they'd learned the story of their uncle's disinheritance for becoming an Imperial lieutenant, they'd begun to wish that Owen had seen fit to name them as his heirs, instead of Luke. Couldn't their grandfather see that the twins were much more competent to carry on the work? Their scatterbrained cousin would lose the whole endowment — he'd probably run off joyriding in that stupid T-16, leaving the place wide open for the Jawas and Tusken to rob him blind.

Reality had turned out a hundred times worse, however. Their grandparents had been murdered and the farmstead gutted by Imperial Stormtroopers. Fortunately Luke, at least, had escaped, and after running around the galaxy and becoming a hero of the Rebel Alliance — the twins were still dubious about that — he had returned briefly to Tatooine to notarize a statement transferring all inheritance rights to the twins.

Terry and Joel had been ecstatic. They'd never expected to own a moisture farm so early in life. Immediately marrying their childhood sweethearts, as they'd planned to do as soon as they'd saved enough money, they'd moved with the young women to the Anchorhead rural district in the southern hemisphere.

The Zeke twins looked upon the project not only as a

way of providing well for themselves and their new families, but also as a subtle act of defiance against the Empire. Like the rest of their family, Joel and Terry held no love for the oppressive government under which they lived, although they weren't zealous enough to actually work for the Rebel Alliance.



Aeslyn crouched among the vines and potted plants surrounding the central vaporator, and looked up when Joel bounded down the steps into the courtyard.

"Where's Elci?"

Aeslyn stood and gestured toward Joel's and Elci's living room. "The comlink buzzed; she went to—"

At that moment, Joel's wife stuck her head out the irregularly shaped door that connected their part of the house to the courtyard. She said in a shaky voice, "I'm glad you're home, Joel. Come in here, please, and talk to this guy."

Joel exchanged frowns with Aeslyn. Then he strode into the room. The young woman remained standing for a moment, slapping the flat of her clippers against her palm, wondering what was wrong. Then, pushing her red-brown hair behind her ears, she stooped to resume her pruning. She'd probably find out soon enough.

A few seconds later, she jumped upright and let out a squawk when Terry jabbed his index fingers into the sides of her waist. As he laughed, she swung around to glare at him. "You're going to make me miscarry if you pull that very often!"

Terry wiped the smile from his face. "I won't do it again, Lyn — not 'til after the baby's born, at least." He hugged her, placing one hand on her abdomen. "How's she doing today?"

"Still alive and kicking — especially kicking," Aeslyn replied, kissing him. "And I've been feeling well enough to get a lot of work done on the plants."

"They look healthy," Terry remarked. He gave her another gentle squeeze. "I used to think Grandma Lars had the greenest thumb on Tatooine, but I guess I was wrong."

Aeslyn bent to snip off a few more stray branches. "It's the least I can do, especially since I'm no great seamstress like Elci. I want to do something to help out."

"Don't put yourself down. You've got lots of talents we need," he said. She smiled up at him, and seemed about to say something further, when Joel stepped out of his living room.

"Terry! Lyn! Come quick!"

Startled, the couple raced across the courtyard. When they entered the room, Aeslyn glanced at Elci, who was slumped into an easy chair, her face drained and pale. "What's wrong?" Aeslyn exclaimed, glancing at her sister-in-law's swollen waistline. "Is the baby coming early?"

"No," said Joel, his face as ashen as his wife's. He grasped Terry's arm. "I just talked to an Imperial official in Mos Eisley. It seems that they've dug up some 'ir-

regularities' in our deed to this farm."

"You mean. . .they're saying we don't really own the place?"

"Sounds like it, doesn't it?"



The young clerk looked up from his intercom and beckoned to Joel and Terry. "Commissioner Didale will see you now."

The twins jumped up from their seats; they'd been sitting tensely on the edges of plastimold chairs in the Land Commissioner's anteroom for close to two standard hours. As they crossed the room, Terry wondered which was weighing them down more: the heavy grey 'gentlemen farmer' robes that Elci had insisted they wear instead of their comfortable, loose desert whites; or the sense of bewilderment and foreboding they'd brought to this appointment.

Although they and their wives had discussed the imminent meeting with the commissioner for hours the night before, they had not been able to come to any conclusion about the government's sudden challenge to their property rights. They'd been living on the farm for close to a year; why hadn't they been contacted until now? As far as the twins knew, Luke had gone through all the proper legal procedures to transfer the bequest. They were also certain that their grandfather's will was in order.

After a sleepless night, the twins had rushed off to Mos Eisley, reluctantly refusing to allow their pregnant wives to accompany them on the long, hot trip.

Now, entering the commissioner's office, they stood just inside the door, waiting until the Imperial official deigned to notice their presence. After several moments, the white-haired, heavy-set man looked up and motioned them forward. Nervously glancing at each other, the twins took seats before Didale's massive desk.

"You are—?" Didale said abruptly, not bothering to introduce himself or shake hands with them.

"Joel Zeke, this is my brother, Terry. We received word that—"

"Ah, yes. The Zeke boys." Joel bristled as Didale rummaged through the tape cartridges on his desk, but Terry shot his brother a glance that said, "Keep cool!" No matter how bent this petty bureaucrat was on being irritating, Terry knew it was best not to allow the treatment to anger them visibly.

"It's been brought to my attention that you two did not go through standard procedures in acquiring your moisture farm," the commissioner said, pushing a micro-tape into his desktop viewer. "To begin with, you didn't requisition official approval for the transfer by filing form 3-XT-975. Nor was the transfer legitimated by an exchange of cash or commodities for the property. It seems to have been a simple 'give-away' on the part of this," he paused to peer at the viewer screen, "this Luke Skywalker. In addition, you did not obtain the signatures of four witnesses to the transfer. Or show documentary proof that all parties involved were at least eighteen standard years of age. Or submit form 3-XT-976 to close the transaction." Commissioner Didale snapped off his

viewer. "Well? What do you two have to say for yourselves?"

Dumbfounded, the twins stared at each other, feeling totally inundated by the flood of 'did-nots'. Finally Terry refocused on the commissioner. "Sir," he said slowly, "we never knew about all this. We went to a notary public at the North Polar Station, who witnessed and sealed Luke's statement of transfer, and verified that we paid the bequest taxes." Terry shrugged. "It's the way legal contracts have been drawn up here on Tatooine since our grandfather first immigrated, decades ago. The notary's seal has never been challenged before."

Joel found his voice at last. "My brother and I were eighteen, and Luke was twenty, at the time of the transfer. Even though we didn't bring our birth certificates, we were all of age."

Terry thought fleetingly that it was a good thing no one had asked for Luke's birth certificate before this since he didn't have one. He'd been born off Tatooine, only the Maker knew where, to a Jedi couple who hadn't been legally married in the eyes of the Empire.

Joel hadn't stopped talking. ". . .Skywalker is our cousin — our mother's if you want to get technical. Doesn't the Empire have more permissive standards for contracts between members of the same family?"

"No, it doesn't," Didale answered. "Imperial law recognizes no special considerations in legal dealings between individuals who happen to have a few genes in common."

The twins gazed at him incredulously, and Terry knew the same implications had struck Joel. Didale's simple statement was mind boggling. Family law, parental rights, were all blown to hyperspace and back. By the twin suns, Terry thought, what a ridiculous system!

Didale continued, "And your other points of defense won't stand up in court. We are already aware of the primitive, simplistic legal practices the pioneers have been using on this rustic dustball. The galactic government has decided to bring all the outworlds into conformity with the rest of civilization."

Terry rubbed his forehead, then said in resignation, "What do we have to do, Commissioner?"

"On your way out, pick up instructions and the proper forms from my clerk. Then follow the instructions to the letter." Didale reached for the toggle of his intercom while dismissing them. "You have ten days in which to comply with Imperial law."

Joel sat bolt upright. "Wait a minute, sir!"

The commissioner regarded him with irritation. "What is it?"

"Does this mean that Luke has to sign these documents?"

"Of course. I thought I'd made that clear."

"But he's not even on-planet!"

"Indeed. Where is he, then?"

"He's a navigator on an intersystems merchant

freighter," Terry interjected quickly, afraid that Joel, in his anger and confusion, would forget the cover story Luke had given them. They had enough problems without the Empire finding out they were related to a rebel.

"Well, boys, I suggest you contact him through his spacelines company and get him here — and it had better be within the ten days."

"We don't even know which company he works for," Joel said in a strained voice.

Didale slammed his fist on his desk. "Then start playing detective!"

Terry jumped up and collared his brother. "Come on," he said, wanting to get his brother out of there before Joel punched Didale right in his oversized nose. They stalked from the office, both seething with fury.

Joel headed straight to the speeder, but Terry remembered to stop and ask for the necessary forms. "When did these procedures for property transfer go into effect?" he asked the clerk while reaching for the proffered microtapes.

"About three standard months back, I believe."

Terry stared at the teenager, flabbergasted. "And the laws are being made retroactive?"

The clerk reddened. "Well, uh. . .yes, sir. In some cases."

"In some cases," Terry repeated under his breath. He turned on his heel and left the room.



"I feel sick," Joel mumbled as Terry joined him near their speeder, outside the sprawling Imperial office building.

"You look sick," Terry agreed, noting that his brother's face seemed as grey as his eyes.

"Well, you don't look too good yourself, either." Joel ran his hand through his light brown hair. "Ter', what are we going to do?"

"I don't know." Terry climbed into the speeder, beckoning to his brother. "Get in. Let's go pick up some presents for the girls. Then we'll hit a cantina for a few brews, and figure out how we can get Luke back here." As Joel obeyed, Terry muttered, "You know, I have a strange feeling this is all his fault. The twit."

Joel was startled out of his brooding silence. "I thought you were the rational half of our team. How could it be Luke's fault?"

"Don't know," Terry said again, driving away down the narrow, dusty streets. "Well, let's look at the bright side. We can always try to buy the farm back when they put it up for public auction."

"Are you out of your mind? Buy our own property? That's the worst idea I've ever heard!"

"It was a joke."

Joel scowled. "Well, it wasn't funny."

About a half-hour later, they pulled up in front of the least rowdy 'watering hole' they could find. Terry had finished telling his twin about the selective retroactive application of the property laws, and Joel was calling Didale every profane name he had ever heard.

"What I can't figure out is, why us?" Terry said as they headed for the cantina's entryway. "We've never done anything to attract attention to ourselves, or—"

Joel halted in his tracks. "We haven't, but our relatives have," he said slowly, then lowered his voice. "Aunt Kai and Luke are both rebels. And look what happened to Grandma and Grandpa."

Terry thought about it, and turned pale. "Maybe you're right. But if they do know, why don't they simply blast us out of existence if they want revenge? Why this whole complicated scheme?"

"You're the one who said it's Luke's fault."

"What do you mean by—"

Terry was forced to stop speaking when he was suddenly thumped on the back hard enough to have the breath knocked out of him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that Joel had received the same treatment. They turned to find a brawny, dark-haired man grinning at them.

"If I'd known you two were coming to town today, I would've asked you to get my droid parts for me!"

"Oh, hi, Merl," Joel said. Terry merely nodded at their neighbor. Merl Darklighter studied their faces for an instant, then reached over and mussed Terry's golden blond hair.

"Why the glum looks, youngsters?" he said. "Come on, I'm buying." Darklighter put his arms around their shoulders and steered them into the cantina.

Terry and Joel smiled at each other as they sat down at a table and their big, gruff companion called an order to the bartender. Darklighter was exactly what they needed to cheer them up. Merl had lost his only son, Biggs, in a battle between the rebels and the Imperials. They seldom minded that he treated them more like 'youngsters' than adults, realizing he'd transferred some part of his fatherly feelings to them.

After three mugs and a huge pitcher of dark-colored, frothy bekla arrived, Merl turned back to his guests. "Now, tell me why you two look like you've lost your best friend."

"Not our best friend, our best farm," Joel muttered.

"Our only farm," Terry corrected.

Darklighter frowned at them. "You're making yourselves as clear as obsidian. What do you mean, lost your farm?"

"Well, we haven't lost it yet," Joel said. He raised an eyebrow at his brother. "Should we tell him, Terry?"

"Yeah. Maybe he can help us think of a way out."

The twins launched into a detailed account of their meeting with Commissioner Didale, liberally sprinkling

the story with speculations on the Imperial's ancestry and habits. Darklighter's expression hardened as they talked. He glanced around at the saloon's multi-species clientele and warned the twins to keep their voices down.

"Well, what do you say?" Terry asked as they finished their report. "Can you think of any way we can get in touch with Luke, get him to come home for a few days?"

"And what about this business of a three-month-old law applying to a year-old contract?" Joel said.

"It does smell like a dead bantha, doesn't it?" Darklighter agreed, ignoring Terry's question. "I doubt there's anything you can do about that, though. The Imperials can do anything they damn well please with their 'laws'." He fell silent, deep in thought. Then he lifted his head and fixed the twins with his gaze. "You boys haven't told anyone besides me about this, have you?"

Terry and Joel shook their heads in unison.

"Good. Keep it that way." He rose and motioned to the bartender. "One more pitcher for this table, and bring me the tab." Darklighter placed his hands on the table and leaned down to say in a low voice, "I'm going to do some checking around, see what I can find out. I'll be over to see you tonight or tomorrow morning."

Puzzled, the twins watched as Merl tossed a few coins to the bartender and slipped out of the cantina. "What do you suppose he means by 'checking around'?" Joel said.

"Don't know. I guess we'll find out soon enough." Terry reached for the fresh pitcher of bekla, and refilled the mugs. After all, he thought glumly, we need something to fortify us, before we break the bad news to Lyn and Elci.



Luke Skywalker poked his head out of his quarters' door and peered up and down the hallway. Satisfied that he was unobserved, he emerged from the room and tiptoed down the corridor through the night-status gloom. He was dressed in his beige fatigues, his lightsaber dangling from his belt, and he carried a case containing two practice remotes.

Skywalker made it to the nearest exercise room, a deck below his quarters on the huge Alliance cruiser, without any of the skeleton crew on duty discovering his presence. Breathing a sigh of relief upon finding the small gymnasium unoccupied, he placed the case on one of the benches lining the wall, and removed his jacket. This was the first time in several days that he'd had a chance to practice some of the fencing techniques Major Ianderle had taught him, as well as to try to apply some of the principles of the Force's use he'd read about in Ben's journals.

Before beginning his saber practice, the young man ran through some breathing and stretching exercises, finishing off with a few knee bends. Finally, taking the remotes from the case and activating them, he ignited his saber and got to work.

Luke found that he could easily deflect the red, needle-like beams which the remotes shot at him. The

intensive, although irregular, tutoring sessions with the Alliance's weaponry chief, who was also a handweapons expert, were beginning to pay off.

After a while, the remotes signalled that they were running low on power. With a final sweep of his blade, Luke relaxed from the fighting stance and two-handed grip on the hilt which Ianderle had confirmed were the most effective techniques for lightsaber combat. He deactivated his weapon, then plugged the tiny, globe-shaped droids into a power outlet he spotted on one wall.

While the remotes were recharging, Luke sat down and reached into one of his jacket pockets, and pulled out a long black strip of cloth. He gazed at it for a moment, wondering if he was really ready to fend off attacks from two remotes while blindfolded.

Gathering his courage, he stood and detached the silver balls from the energy socket. They hovered nearby, waiting, while he tied the cloth over his eyes and turned on his lightsaber, which in turn activated the remotes.

Immediately two laser needles stung him.

"Wait a minute, blast it!" he said aloud, wincing from the pain. Another tiny bolt numbed his thigh, and he hastily deactivated his saber.

'Blast it' is the wrong expression. I think I made a tactical error. He decided that he'd better open himself to the Force's flow before he tried this trick again.

Standing perfectly still, he recalled Kenobi's words, both spoken and written, on 'tuning in', trying to drift and concentrate simultaneously. He was automatically raising his weapon, about to reactivate it, when he sensed an energy disturbance that was totally different from the short, sharp bursts he'd anticipated from the remotes. This one 'radiated' in a distinctive, continuous pattern that was somehow familiar.

"Kaili?" he called, turning toward the source of the disturbance. Kaili began to clap as he pulled off his blindfold and blinked at her.

His cousin was leaning against the doorjamb. Laughing, she came into the room and seated herself on the bench. "Very good, Luke! I never expected you to sense me so quickly."

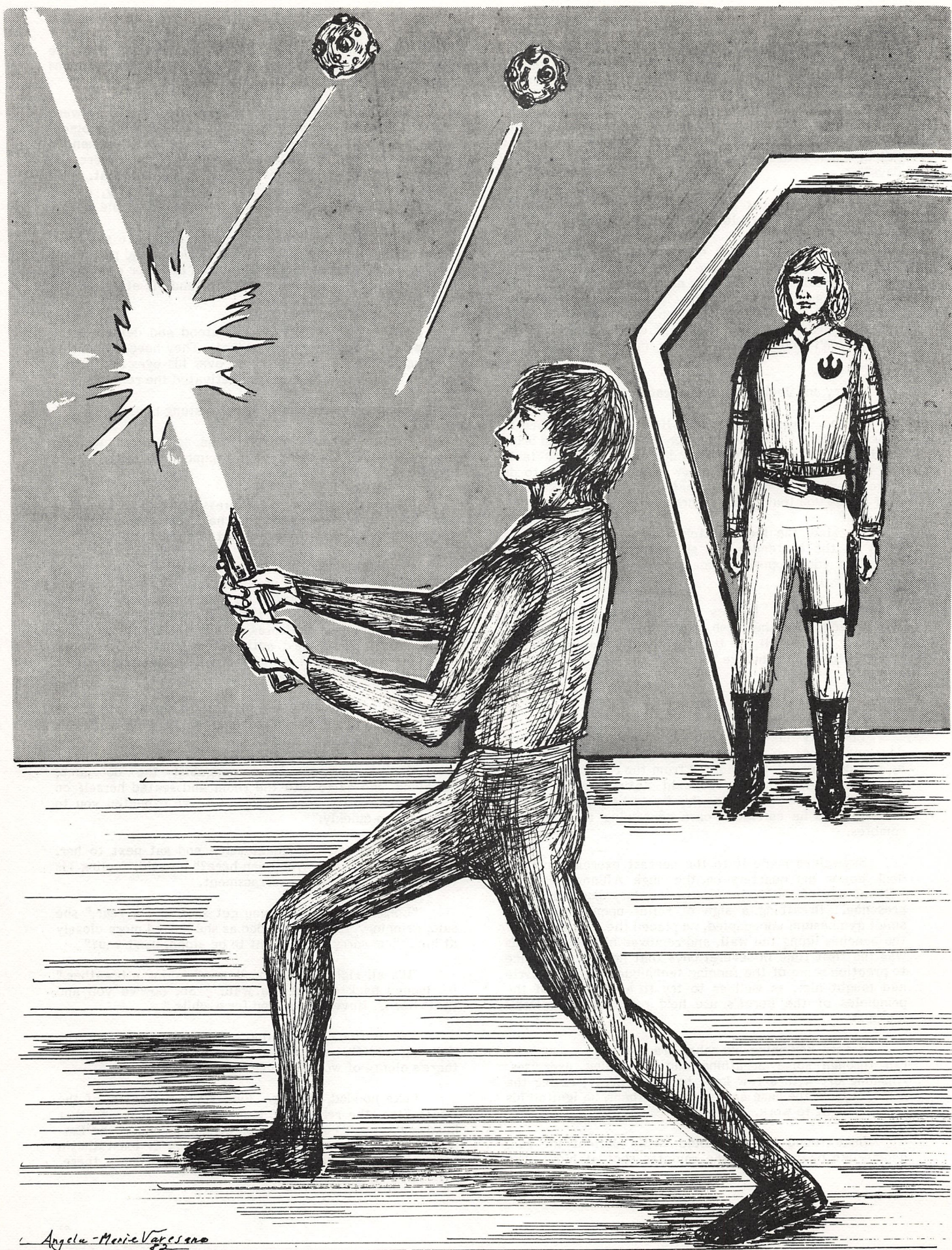
Luke pushed his jacket aside and sat next to her. "Uh. . .how long have you been here?" he said, feeling his face grow warm with embarrassment.

"Long enough to see you get shot in the rear," she said, grinning. Her smile faded as she looked more closely at him. "I'm sorry -- you want to be alone, don't you?"

"It's all right, Kai, I don't mind taking a breather." He leaned back against the wall. "So, how've you and Brett been? Haven't seen you for a while."

"We're fine. Busy, that's for sure. With all the 'fighting and fleeing' the Alliance has been doing lately, there's plenty of work for mechanics."

Luke nodded, sighing. Ever since the battle of the Death Star, the rebels had been unable to make further headway toward conquering, or even weakening, the Empire. They'd been driven from Yavin IV; at least they'd been almost finished with evacuation procedures there.



Ever since, they'd been unable to set up another central base. The Emperor's minions had routed them before they'd been able to get even a toehold on two different planets. Only now, as the rebels had stationed what starfleet they possessed on the rim of the galaxy, was there some respite. The Alliance leaders intended to take their time and pick a strategic, defensible location, rather than make any more rash moves.

"It is depressing, isn't it?" Kaili said, and Luke was reminded of his cousin's untrained, but very real, talents. Her empathy was downright uncanny sometimes. And her clairvoyance. . .

"Why did you come looking for me, Kai?" he asked suddenly.

"Do I need a reason?" she replied. "I decided to make time to visit, that's all. Brett's working late, so I thought this was a good opportunity, providing you weren't asleep."

Luke stared at her. She didn't 'feel' as flippant as she was acting. "Naw," he said after a moment. "You have something special to tell me. Come on now, spit it out."

Kaili started, then her blue eyes narrowed. "You're pretty empathic yourself," she said. "Yeah, I do have something to tell you, but it's so. . .so vague, I'm not sure how to say it."

Luke leaned forward, waiting. Looking down at her hands, Kaili said diffidently, "I've been having feelings that something. . .some plot. . .has been cooked up against you, and the — the focal point is at home."

"Tatooine?"

"Yes. I've been seeing 'flashes', though nothing clearly, ever since my friend Dona came back from her latest intelligence mission. It upset me when she reported that the Imperials have discovered your identity."

Luke scowled. That news disturbed him too, especially the implication that Darth Vader knew about him, and would personally hunt him down in order to prevent the Alliance from reviving the Jedi.

Kaili went on, "Dona's off on another network reconnaissance—"

"I know. Han and Chewie took her."

"—so maybe she'll find out more. Tatooine's their last stop. I hope her information's more solid than mine." She frowned. "The clearest feeling I get is that you shouldn't go to Tatooine, no matter what."

Luke burst out laughing. "Don't worry, Kai. It would take a major catastrophe to drag me back there. What kind of 'plot' is this, anyway — is it a major catastrophe?"

"Maybe so, maybe no." Kaili shook her head in confusion. "I just can't tell."

The young man drummed his fingers on the bench. "Maybe something in the journals would help you figure it out. Have you tried studying the tapes I gave you?"

"Now and then. But, honestly, Luke, I haven't had

the time. You know how it is."

"I sure do." He sighed. "I want so much to be a Jedi knight, like my father. But the generals are always telling me to do this, go there, learn that. . . . They don't give me any time to study the journals at all. Leia's tried to redistribute some of my duties to others, but new duties always crop up. There's not much she can do."

Kaili patted his back consolingly. "The trials and tribulations of a resourceful young commander." Luke chuckled, and she continued, "I have a feeling that reviving the Jedi is pretty low on a lot of the chiefs' priorities."

"Yeah, but I think they'd better make it higher. Anyway," he shot a mock-scolding glance at her, "go hit the books, and see if they can help you get clearer impressions. Let me know if you figure out anything more."

"Yes, sir!" she said, saluting. They laughed together, then Kaili sobered and said, "I really wish that I'd allowed my Jedi friend, Dorit — you remember me telling you about her? — I wish I'd let her train me, as she'd wanted to do. Things certainly would have been easier that way. Maybe I'd have even ended up a Jedi counselor, like her. That would have been nice."

"I thought you didn't want to be a Jedi."

"I've been reconsidering. A knight, no. A counselor, though. . ." Kaili shrugged.

Luke nodded, understanding the difference. "I know what you mean about needing a teacher," he said pensively. "A real Jedi master would make all the difference in the galaxy to me, too." He stood up, stretching. "Well, I'd better get back to my practicing, if you don't mind, Kai."

"I'm going, I'm going," she laughed. "But just remember, Luke — stay away from Tatooine."

"I couldn't go even if I wanted to. In a few days I'm leading an exploration team out to look for a new base. We're checking out the Diaslan, Hoth, and Posfel systems."

"Find us a good home, and fast. I'm sick of this ship," Kaili said, starting to leave. She paused in the doorway, then turned back and took the blindfold from her cousin. "Let me tie this for you," she teased. "I want to make sure you don't cheat!"



Merl Darklighter didn't turn up at the Zeke's farm until the next evening, which put the twins and their wives even more on edge than the bad news itself had. They spent the day walking around in a daze, occasionally offering each other weak-sounding words of encouragement, and half-heartedly preparing for the Anchorhead Harvest Festival, which was to begin in two days.

They were sitting in the dining area, trying to eat supper, when they heard Darklighter's landspeeder come to a halt up on the sand. Joel and Terry raced up the steps and practically dragged Merl back down to the dining area with them. The twins felt so helpless in their predicament, and at such a loss as to what to do, that anything their neighbor could say or suggest to them was

eagerly welcomed.

Darklighter nodded his thanks to Elci as she poured him a tall glass of iced tea, but he refused the offer to share their meal. "I'd better get right down to business without any socializing," he said. He looked directly at the twins. "Boys, this whole situation's a lot more serious than it seems."

They studied Merl's face. He seemed about to continue, when Aeslyn said, "How could it be worse? Losing our home's bad enough."

"Believe me, it is worse. Sit down," he said to the women, who were still bustling around the table to hide their nervousness. With a glance at each other, Elci and Aeslyn took seats next to their husbands.

"How's it worse?" Joel asked.

Darklighter sighed. After a moment's silence, he said simply, "Your lives are in danger."

"What?" Terry said, stunned. "Why?"

"Because of our rebel relatives, I'll bet," Joel said grimly. "We sort of suspected as much."

"No," Merl said. "Not just that. It's mostly because of your Jedi ancestry."

The twins were speechless. After a moment, Elci said to Joel, "I didn't know you had Jedi in your family."

"I didn't think it mattered." Joel turned to Darklighter. "I don't get it. How do you know about this?"

"I'd better explain more clearly. First of all, after Biggs was killed, an Alliance operative in Mos Eisley got in touch with me, to inform my family. They didn't know Luke had already told me when he was last here. Well, I'd had some time to think about my son, and to realize that what he'd believed in was important. When I talked to the agent I told him that if there was ever any way I could help his cause, he should let me know."

"Are you crazy, getting mixed up with those lunatics?" Terry said.

"How can you say that, when Luke and your aunt are rebels?"

"They're crazy, too," Joel said, crossing his arms. "Besides, what could you do for the rebels, 'way out here?"

"Not much," Darklighter admitted. "I thought I might be their contact in Anchorhead, if they needed one, or they could use my farm as a hideaway. Anyway, they said they would contact me. Yesterday I went in to Mos Eisley and met with an Alliance contact. When you boys told me what happened, I mentioned it to her. She checked around and somehow found out what's going on." Merl paused, wiping his brow and finishing his tea. "She was really upset. She's a close friend of your aunt's, and has a personal interest in helping you — if you'll cooperate with the plans we've made to get you off Tatooine."

"Off Tatooine?" the twins said in unison. "Now I know you're nuts!" Terry added.

"Let me explain. Do you know anything about the

Death Star?"

"Luke said it was a big battlestation," Joel nodded.

"Yes. And my son was killed during the battle, just before Luke dropped the bomb that destroyed it. The Imperials were enraged when it was blown up. It only took them a while to discover Luke's identity. Once they had his name, it can't have been too difficult to trace his background."

"How?" Aeslyn asked.

"They've got an intelligence network too, you know. So now, not only are some pretty high-ranking Imperials after Luke himself, but there's talk of a new Jedi purge, to clean up whatever they missed twenty years ago."

"Wait, Merl," Terry said, his expression brightening. "You said a few minutes ago that there's a woman in Mos Eisley who knows where Luke is. Maybe she could contact him, have him come back here just long enough to sign the papers. You think she'd do it?"

"Yeah," Joel exclaimed. "Then we wouldn't lose the farm!"

"Of all the damned one-track minds—" Darklighter slapped his hand on the tabletop. "Haven't you two been listening to me at all? I said the Imperials are after Luke. And they may be starting a purge again. Don't you know what that means?"

Puzzled, the twins shook their heads. "We're not Jedi," Terry said.

"No, but some of your ancestors were. Right?"

Joel looked a little bored. "Our mother's uncle, and I think a couple of great-grandparents."

"But we're not," Terry repeated.

"The fact remains that you carry the genetic heritage. It's showing up in your relatives now. From what the Alliance agent told me, Luke's learned a lot about using the Force, and Kail's got a little of it, too."

"Merl, that Force business is a lot of bantha crap," Terry said angrily. "If you want us to listen to you, stop talking about mystical garbage."

"The Empire is starting to take this 'bantha crap' very seriously again, so it doesn't really matter what you think. They're checking family records, even on outworlds like Tatooine." Merl looked at the women. "And you two girls are pregnant. The children you're carrying are possible future Jedi." He glanced back at the twins. "Now do you get my meaning?"

Elci paled and cradled her head in her arms on the table, while Aeslyn rose and turned away, biting her lip. Terry and Joel stared at each other. To them, the Jedi knights had been simply an elite police force about whom fanciful legends had grown since their demise. Now they were a dangerous reality.

"You can't be right," Joel said at last. "If you were, the Imps would have blasted us by now. Why go to all the trouble of making us transfer our property rights under Imperial law?"

"They're apparently using you to try and force Luke out into the open. If he comes back here to clear your rights, they'll grab him, easy."

"It's hard to believe the twit is that important," Terry muttered.

"He's not a 'twit' — and you two had better stop thinking of him that way, fast. The Imps'll do anything to get him, including this ruse." Darklighter chuckled a little. "It's a stupid idea, really. They must know there's not much chance it could work, even if you did know how to contact him. I guess they're just trying to cover all bases."

"Why's it stupid?" Elci put in. "I don't know Luke, but surely he'd come to help save his childhood home from the Imperials. That's why he gave it to Joel and Terry in the first place."

"You sure don't know Luke," her husband said bitterly. "He couldn't care less about this place, or us, for that matter."

"It'd inconvenience him to come back here for even one day," Terry added, matching his brother's tone.

"You two are really the limit." Darklighter was exasperated. "I'm sure he would come back, if it would do any good. But all of you are earmarked for execution, whether he comes or not. The Imps are just hoping to catch all five of you at once. Can't you see that?"

Aeslyn walked back to the table and sat down. "Merl, what should we do?"

"At last, a sensible question. Okay. First of all, you two," he pointed at the twins, "go into Mos Eisley tomorrow and submit that first form to the Land Commissioner's office. Then stop at all the merchant spacelines' branch offices and inquire about Luke. That'll make the Imperials think you're looking for him — they already suspect a couple of merchants of having rebel connections. You'll gain a little time."

"How will we get off-planet?" Aeslyn asked.

Terry looked at her incredulously. "You really want to pick up and run?"

"Yes." There was determination in her voice. "My mother's father was a Jedi too, and he barely got away with his life. Mother took care of him — he was an invalid until he died. From what she told me, the Empire was serious — and vicious — about wiping them out then. They're probably serious now." She set her jaw. "Even if the rest of you don't believe Merl, I do. My daughter and I are going to live!"

There was an awkward silence. Then Terry said, "Lyn, I didn't know you had Jedi in your family."

"I didn't think it mat—"

"Lyn, are any of your family on-planet?" Merl interrupted.

"No. Mother died two years ago, and my brother emigrated to Ladaan."

"Good. That's less work for us. But you'd better inform the Alliance where he is, so that if he needs help—"

"Do you mean to tell us the Alliance is going to help all people with Jedi connections?" Elci asked.

"Well, there really aren't that many left. We'll help the ones we can. Besides, a full-fledged purge is just a rumor right now. But they're after the Skywalker relatives for sure."

"What about the twins' parents?" Elci asked suddenly.

"Why should they be in trouble?" Terry said. "Mom's not planning to have any more kids."

"The Imps'll probably be after them anyway. Don't worry, we'll get them out. Now, do you want to hear the rest of the plan?"

"I guess we'd better," Joel growled. "Though I'm still not convinced it's necessary."

"You're as stubborn as Owen ever was," Merl said. "Now, on Festival Day, after the Water Ceremony, I'll meet you in the public square. By then I'll have detailed instructions for you. All I know right now is that you'll be taken out of town, disguised as a wheat shipment." Darklighter grinned, and the twins couldn't help but smile back.

Then Terry bolted out of his seat as if spring-driven. "But what about our farm?" he demanded, beginning to pace.

"There's nothing we can do, boys. If I could think of any other way out of this mess, I'd tell you, because I sure hate to see you young folks go. But I'd hate even more to see you murdered." Merl rose and placed a hand on Terry's shoulder. "I'll try to buy this farm at auction, and hold it until you come back, after the Empire is overthrown. How's that sound?"

"If it's overthrown," Joel said, standing to face Darklighter. "You'd really do that for us?"

"Sure. It'd probably look reasonable to the Imps. I can say I'm expanding my holdings." Merl ran his fingers through his grey-streaked black hair. "I just hope I can scrape up enough credits to do it."

The twins looked at the older man a moment, then simultaneously hugged him, while Aeslyn and Elci did their best to sniff back tears.

"You're taking a risk, doing this," Terry said.

"A small one, yes."

Terry and Joel locked gazes. "We don't know that we're going to go yet," Joel said in a low voice.

"By the Maker's beard—" Darklighter shook his head. "I give up. Lyn, you try to talk sense into them." He walked over and kissed her, then Elci. "I'll say goodbye now; I won't be able to at the Festival."

He took the twins' hands in his own. "Boys, make the right decision, okay?" Merl's voice sounded choked. "Fly free." He reached up and tussled their hair, then hurried out of the room.

The Zekes were quiet until the roar of Darklighter's landspeeder had faded. Aeslyn broke the silence. "Elci,"

she said crisply, "tomorrow you'd better sew deep pockets into the linings of our robes, so we can take every credit we have on hand, and maybe a few personal things. Terry, you and Joel are going into Mos Eisley, aren't you?"

"We want to think about it a little more."

Aeslyn looked at him coldly, then turned to her sister-in-law. "What about you, Elci? Are you going to go with me, and save your son, even if these two dopes won't listen to reason?"

Elci said uncertainly, "Well, if Joel doesn't think it's as serious as Merl said. . ."

Aeslyn stamped her foot. "You can be so blasted spineless sometimes!" she snapped.

Joel put his arm around Elci and glared at Aeslyn. "What's the matter with you? You can't talk to Elci that way!"

"Who can't?"

Terry took Aeslyn's hand, tried to pull her away. "Lyn, you're just overexcited," he said soothingly. "Let's go talk about it."

"I have one more thing to say," Aeslyn said, holding back. "If Weather Watch issued a sandstorm warning, what would you do?"

The twins didn't answer. Aeslyn continued, "You'd take measures to protect us, right? Well, this is the same thing — and a lot worse!"

Terry tugged at her hand again. "Come on. You're not going anywhere, unless I go too."

"Then you'd better go, because I am going!"



"It's almost time for the Water Ceremony," Joel said to Terry. He pulled his brother away from one of the Anchorhead Festival's game booths. "We'd better go get the women."

Terry reluctantly accompanied his twin. "Are we really going through with this?" he muttered.

"Which? The ceremony or running away?"

"Both."

"Well, we did promise to be in the ritual. As for the other. . . ." Joel grimaced.

Terry fell silent as they pushed their way through the crowd of Anchorhead townspeople and area farmers. The twins were still ambivalent about leaving Tatooine. Merl Darklighter had been disturbingly positive about the danger they were in. But two days had passed in which nothing had happened to them, and it had become increasingly difficult to believe that their situation was, in reality, desperate.

"We'd be running away when nothing's chasing us. That would be idiotic," Terry said at last.

"Aeslyn and Elci don't seem to think so," his brother reminded him.

The blond twin sighed. From insistent declarations to outbursts of crying to calm logic, Aeslyn had not let up in her efforts to talk them into bolting.

"Lyn, will you pipe down!" Terry had finally shouted when she'd tried to make him and Joel go into Mos Eisley. "I don't care what you say, I think Merl knew too damn much. If what he said is true, then the Imps have a big security problem!"

"Are you trying to say Merl lied to us?" Aeslyn had countered. "He wouldn't do that, Terry, especially not about something this important. Besides, I don't doubt the Alliance has good espionage. They couldn't have lasted this long without it."

"But he didn't tell us who's going to help us, where we're going. . . ." Joel said.

Elci had joined the argument. Touching Joel's arm, in her timid way, she'd said, "Maybe Lyn's right, dear. Merl wouldn't make up such a story, and he does care about us. We have to trust him and the rebels. Perhaps we can simply leave for a while, and then come back if there really is no danger."

With both women allied, the twins knew they were licked. They'd gone into Mos Eisley and followed Darklighter's advice. But that still didn't mean that they were actually going through with the 'fleeing for their lives' routine.

The twins found their wives near the handicrafts displays. Elci's dark brown eyes were glowing as she walked up to meet them. She held out a small silvery medal on her palm. "Joel," she said, hugging him, "I won first prize for best tapestry."

"I'm proud of you, babe — not surprised, through," Joel said. He glanced slyly at Aeslyn. "How about you, Lyn? Win anything?"

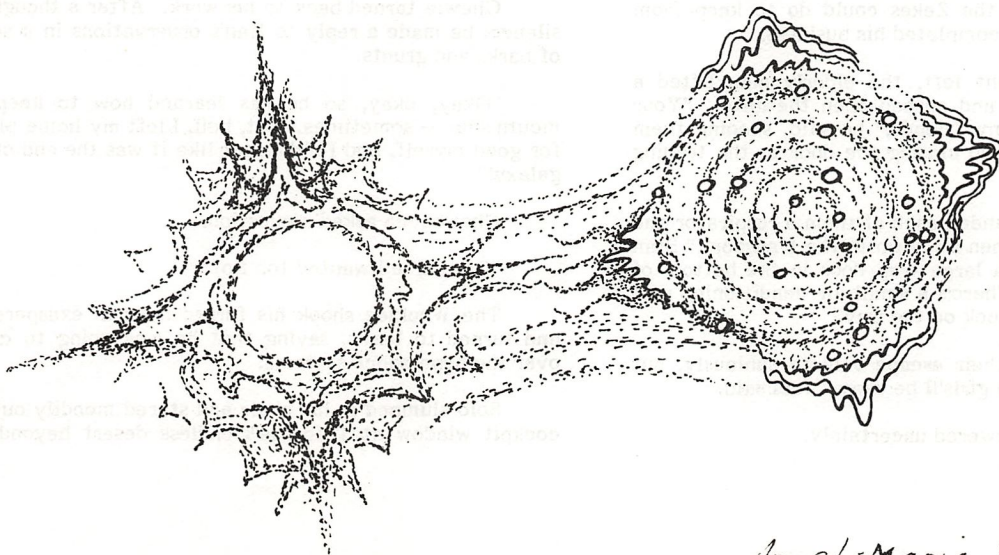
Terry looked uneasily at his wife. Aeslyn had been known to resent any insinuations that her sister-in-law was more artistically gifted than she. Today, however, she seemed not to mind Joel's dig.

"I take credit for cooking and cleaning so she could concentrate on making the thing," she laughed. "I was glad for Elci — that medal's real platinum. We may need to pawn it when we're—"

"Not another word, Lyn," Terry said, frowning. Aeslyn smiled sweetly, and he could almost hear her thinking, "I'm going, dear, with our child, whether you go or not."

The four made their way to the small public square where the Festival crowd was gathering for the Water Ceremony.

The simple rite did not take very long. They and two other young farmer couples — eight people to represent the length of Tatooine's week — took a small container of water and sprinkled it on two stylized, multicolored sun figures that had been spray-painted onto the sand. Meanwhile, Stan Genett, a spry old man who had lived on Tatooine since before Anchorhead was founded, recited a poem about giving moisture back to the air and the suns in order to make the next season as bountiful as the last. Joel and Terry played their part in the ritual, but they had grown up with scientific



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techniques of 'moisturizing' the atmosphere; they wished that controlling Tatooine's ecology were really that simple.

As the crowd milled around the plaza after the ceremony, the Zekes remained standing huddled together in the square, staring at each other. This was the moment of decision, and no one, not even Aeslyn, could move or say anything.

At that moment Merl Darklighter walked up to them. "How're you doin'?" he said in his usual hearty way, clapping his hands on the twins' shoulders. "Never saw that ceremony performed with such style before!"

"Thanks," Joel said dryly. They stared at Merl, silently pleading for a word of encouragement, so they could get up the nerve to do what they must.

Or, better yet, they'd like Darklighter to tell them that it was only a horrible mistake — not for real — after all.

The older man lowered his voice. "Boys, word has it that a Stormtrooper squad is to be sent to the Polar Station tomorrow to arrest your parents. But the Alliance agent got them onto the rebel ship this morning. Thank the Maker, the Imps don't seem to know you people have our help. They think we're too stupid to figure it out, I guess." He looked intensely at each of them. "But they'll make their move against you soon. You've got to get away too."

"How?" Aeslyn said.

"Go to Stan's Produce Depot immediately. He's waiting for you." Merl raised his voice to its customary volume. "Have a good time, enjoy the rest of the Festival, youngsters. I'll be over to see your new vaporators tomorrow."

"We'll be looking for you," Terry said. "Bye, Merl."

As Darklighter left them, Aeslyn turned away toward the Produce Depot. "I've got a few things to get at Stan's," she said. "Want to come along?"

The other three Zekes hesitated an instant, then followed her toward the large, brick building across the square.

When they entered the depot, the proprietor was talking to a customer. "Be with you in a minute, folks," he called. It was all the Zekes could do to keep from fidgeting while Genett completed his business.

After Stan's client left, the elderly man lifted a section of the counter and pushed open the gate. "Your shipment's all ready, my friends," he said, shooing them into the depot garage and closing the door to the trading area behind them.

Swiftly Genett handed each of them a respirator and mask. "Put these on, then lie down in the transport," Stan ordered, pulling open a large trap door in the bottom of the flatbed vehicle. "There's a small air-conditioning unit in there, so you won't cook on the way."

The Zekes eyes their escape vehicle dubiously, but climbed in. "I hope you girls'll be okay," Joel said.

"So do I," Elci answered uncertainly.

As Genett was about to close the hatch, Terry stopped him. "Where are we going?"

"You'll find out soon enough. Now lie down and put those respirators on."

Stan shut the door over them, plunging them into pitch darkness. They heard the air-conditioning unit snap on. Terry wrapped his arms around Aeslyn; he assumed Joel would offer the same comfort to Elci. No one spoke, and Terry wondered if they all felt as emotionally numb as he did.

As the Zekes heard and felt Stan throwing bags of wheat onto the transport above them, Terry thought forlornly of the Water Ceremony. There'll be no Tatooine moisture next season for us. Maybe...never again.

—

Han Solo scraped the last of his lunch from his plate, then swiveled in his chair by the main cabin's computer terminal to look at the almost middle-aged couple sitting like statues by the game board. "Uh. . . sure you folks won't have a bite to eat?"

They glanced at him and silently shook their heads.

Han paused a moment before deciding to try again. "How are you related to the kid?"

"Who?" said Randal Zeke.

"Luke, I mean. Luke Skywalker."

Zeke's wife, Dori, smiled slightly. "He's my cousin, and my foster brother." Her smile disappeared, and she laid her head on her husband's shoulder. "Right now, though, I almost wish I'd never heard of him."

The Corellian jumped up and said, "Excuse me," hurrying away to the cockpit before she started sobbing again. So much for being sociable.

"What a couple of deadbeats," he muttered to Chewbacca as he dropped into his pilot's seat. The Wookiee paused in his systems checkout and looked questioningly at his captain.

"They can hardly put two words together," Han explained. "I can't believe they're related to the kid — he never shuts up!"

Chewie turned back to his work. After a thoughtful silence, he made a reply to Han's observations in a series of barks and grunts.

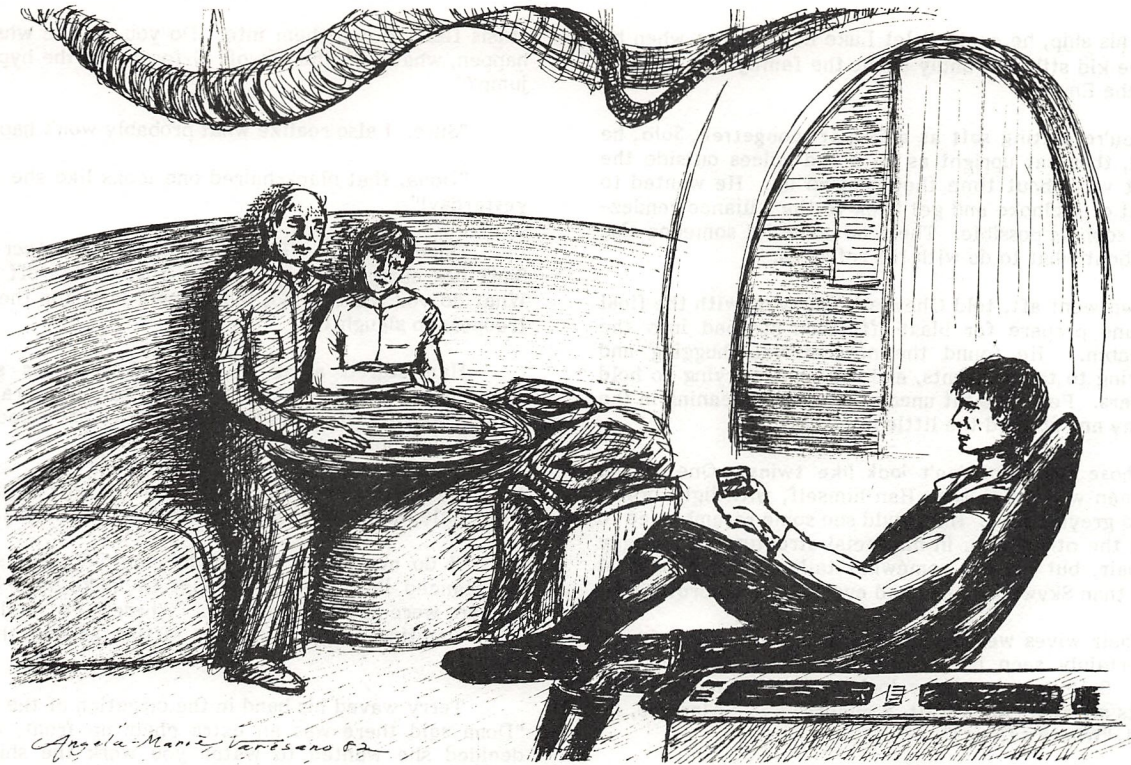
"Okay, okay, so he has learned how to keep his mouth shut — sometimes. But, hell, I left my home planet for good myself, and I didn't act like it was the end of the galaxy!"

Chewbacca asked a question.

"Of course I wanted to. So?"

The Wookiee shook his furred head in exasperation and turned to leave, saying that he was going to check over the hyperspace systems.

Solo slumped in his chair and stared moodily out the cockpit window at Tatooine's endless desert beyond the



Welnoke docking bay wall. He could understand the point Chewie had been trying to make, but he felt too irritable to deal with it. It had been bad enough coming back to this gods-forsaken dustball; worse, they couldn't even touch down in Mos Eisley, the only lively spot on the planet, because the place was swarming with Imperials, not to mention Jabba the Hut's bounty hunters. Dona Rwndl's insistence that he give unwanted passengers a ride had pushed him close to the limits of what he was willing to do for the rebellion.

Ah, come off it, Solo, he told himself. Things could be worse. Besides, you've done crazier things for them in the last year....

The Corellian pushed away the thought of his increasing cooperation with the Alliance, wondering instead how much longer Dona and her other refugees would be. They were being flown to Welnoke from somewhere in the Jundland Wastes, and she had gone to meet them.

Han had to admit to himself that he rather liked the golden-skinned Cairnese intelligence agent he'd been asked to pilot around the Empire on her espionage mission. Her competent work for him during her cover role as a Millennium Falcon crewmember had earned his respect, too. He'd had to carry only legit cargoes this trip in order to minimize the dangers from Imperial port 'snoopers'. Normally, this wasn't nearly as lucrative for him as smuggling, but he'd found that he'd made good profits after all, due mostly to Dona's excellent information sources and his own talents at wheeling and dealing. The money had been enough to buy supplies and some desperately needed replacement parts for the Falcon, although it was still not sufficient to pay off Jabba the Hut. The Alliance owed Han a good deal of recompense, but most of it was on credit, and somehow Solo doubted the Hut would accept that as negotiable currency.

He only wished Rwndl wasn't so good at talking him into doing things he didn't want to do. She'd been highly trained in the psychology of communications and propaganda, and it gave her an unfair advantage when she wanted her own way.

This 'rescue', for example. When Dona had returned from Mos Eisley three days ago, he'd flatly refused to take on more passengers. "What'll they pay me?" he'd asked.

"Nothing, Han!" she'd cried, her normal calm, collected demeanor giving way to frantic pleading. "Don't you understand? They're penniless refugees!"

"Well, ain't that a shame," Han had retorted. "No way, sweetheart. Especially if the Imps are on their tails. I remember what happened to me the last time I took on a hot charter."

After a few minutes of begging, during which Han remained obstinate, Dona had taken a sharp breath, as if suddenly remembering something. Then she'd turned to walk away. "Very well, Captain Solo," she'd said. "When we get back to the cruiser, I guess I'll just have to break the sad news to Commander Skywalker that his family has been exterminated."

Han had been struck dumb for an instant, then had stalked over to her and grabbed her arm. "What are you talking about?"

"Other than Kaili and Brett Karaga, these 'hot' passengers are your friend Luke's remaining relatives. Not that it makes any difference, of course."

Han had demanded an explanation, and then grudgingly agreed to the escape scheme. No matter what his feelings were about non-paying strangers hitching a

ride on his ship, he couldn't let Luke down — not when he knew the kid still felt badly about the family he'd already lost to the Empire.

You're getting soft as a Siripor spongetree, Solo, he scowled, then sat upright as he heard voices outside the ship. It was about time they showed up. He wanted to blast out of Welnoke and get back to the Alliance rendezvous as soon as possible. There he could let someone else worry about what to do with the refugees.

Han went aft, told Chewie to hurry up with the final check and prepare for blast-off, then stepped into the main cabin. He found the new arrivals hugging and murmuring to their parents, and apparently trying to hold back tears. Feeling a bit uncomfortable, he leaning in the hatchway and studied the little group.

Those two sure don't look like twins. One of the young men was taller than Han himself, with light brown hair and greyish eyes. Han could see some resemblance to Luke in the other man, in his facial structure and shaggy blond hair, but he was somewhat taller and a good deal huskier than Skywalker, and had eyes of a deep brown hue.

Their wives weren't bad looking, Han mused, though he'd certainly seen better walking the streets of Mos Eisley. Solo took a closer look at the women, and his thoughts stopped cold. Wait a minute. . . . Alarmed, he shouted, "Where's Dona?"

The group stared at him. "Who are you?" the blond twin demanded.

"I'm nobody — just the captain of this ship," Han sneered. "And I want to know—"

He was interrupted by one of the young women stepping forward and smiling at him. "I'm sorry for my husband's abruptness, Captain. We'll all in a bit of shock. I'm Aeslyn Zeke, my husband's name is Terry." She pointed at the other couple. "And that's Joel and Elci. You already know our parents, I guess."

Dori Zeke joined Aeslyn and said, "Captain Solo, please forgive us for not seeming very grateful to you for all the trouble you're going to. It's just that. . ." Her voice trailed off.

"Yeah, it's all right," Han said, somewhat mollified. "Now, where's Dona?"

"I think she's outside, talking to the pilot who brought us," Aeslyn said.

"Okay," Han said, starting to leave. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Chewbacca enter the cabin. The four newcomers stared at the Wookiee with astonishment and some fear until Solo said, "That's my partner. He'll explain how to strap in." Han rushed out, forgetting that his guests probably didn't understand Chewbacca's language.

He found the red-haired Cairnese woman walking up the Falcon's gangplank, and grabbed her arm roughly. "Hey, Rwan, you didn't tell me those women were pregnant!"

Dona shook off his hand and grinned at him. "You didn't ask."

"Don't get cute, baby. You know I don't have a

stasis field to pop them into. Do you realize what could happen, what with the lift-off G-force and the hyperspace jump?"

"Sure. I also realize what probably won't happen."

"Dona, that black-haired one looks like she was due yesterday!"

Dona sighed. "Elci's not due for another month. She's just carrying a big, healthy boy. Come off it, Han. What do you want to do, leave them here for the Stormtroopers to slaughter?"

Han stared after Rwan helplessly as she disappeared into the ship, then followed her up the ramp. He found Chewie just inside the hatch. "I've got a bad feeling about this," Solo muttered.

Chewbacca chortled and made a smart remark as they sealed the airlock and started for the cockpit.

"I do not worry too much!" the Corellian snapped. He glanced into the main cabin to make sure his passengers were secured properly. "Where's, uh, Aeslyn?" he said, counting only five bodies sitting around the game board.

Terry waved his hand in the direction of the cockpit. "Dona said there was an extra chair up front, and Lyn decided she wanted to watch you work the ship." He grimaced. "I say, who cares?"

Solo sent him a withering look and went forward. He found Aeslyn strapped into the seat behind Chewie's, and Dona in the navigator's chair.

"Uh, do you mind if I ask you a question?" he said to the Tatooine woman as he fastened his own straps.

"No, go ahead."

"Why aren't you all weepy and mad at the universe, like you folks?"

Aeslyn smiled. "I am sorry to leave my home, Captain Solo. But I think saving our lives is more important. Besides, I like moisture farming, but I wasn't obsessed with it."

"Only sensible one of the group," Han said. He snapped on his comlink. "Welnoke control, come in."

A thick silence answered him.

Han pushed the signaler again, harder. "Wake up, Welnoke control! I want to blast out of here, now!"

He heard a burst of static as a channel switched on, then a drowsy voice answered, "Huh? Who is this?"

The idiot controller really had been asleep! Gods, no wonder the Imperials didn't bother to patrol this two-bit spaceport; even Jabba didn't think it worth infiltrating. "This is Captain Solo. Just thought you might want to know I'm leaving. And I'd be much obliged if you'd make sure the local teenyboppers keep their T-16s out of my flight path."

"Oh, uh, sure. Have a nice trip."

He ignored Dona's and Aeslyn's giggles as he snapped

off the com and told Chewie to begin the lift-off sequence. "Damn hick planet," Han said. "Uh, sorry," he added, glancing at Aeslyn. "Okay, Chewie, punch it."

As the Falcon leapt into space, the Corellian heard Aeslyn gasp, and again thought of what the acceleration force might do to the pregnant women. Well, they asked for it. It wasn't my idea. Then he forgot them as he programmed the navicom for the hyperspace coordinates.

"Ready for the jump to lightspeed," he instructed his co-pilot. Chewbacca nodded and flipped a few toggles on his board in preparation. Han leaned forward and pushed the control levers.

Nothing happened.

Solo stared out the cockpit window in dismay for a moment, then swung around angrily to the Wookiee. "I thought you finished installing that new motivator!"

Chewbacca growled a terse statement at him.

"Yeah, well, you musta forgot something. C'mon." He unstrapped and stood. "It's a damn good thing we're not being chased."

Dona laughed, and Han jabbed a finger in her direction. "It's not funny, sweetheart. My ship hasn't been the same since I started working for your precious rebellion. I should go back to my life of crime and vice — the old bird flew perfectly then!"

As he and the Wookiee left the cockpit, he heard Aeslyn say, "Is he always that rude?"

"He likes to make people think he's tough," Dona said. "It's a put on."

That shows how much you know about me, Rwandl, the Corellian thought, glowering. He began his checkout, making adjustments in the circuitry below deck and helping Chewbacca reinstall the motivator. They returned forward, and Han breathed a sigh of relief when the stars stretched into streaks around them, and were replaced with the violet haziness of hyperspace.

Aeslyn said, "Thanks for letting me sit here, Captain. I've never seen anything like that before! Uh... can I get up now?"

"Huh? Oh, sure." Han remained seated, beginning to doze a little, as Dona and Chewbacca followed Aeslyn out.

An interminable time later, the Corellian was jolted fully awake by the sounds of a commotion coming from the main cabin. I don't think I want to know what's wrong now, he thought wearily.

Within a few minutes Chewbacca returned to the cockpit and seated himself, chuckling. Solo eyed him. "What's so funny?" he asked warily. "What's going on out there?"

The Wookiee thought a moment, then asked his captain a question.

"No, I'm not a prophet," Han growled. "What's that supposed to..." He sat bolt upright and paled as the import of Chewbacca's query sank in. "Oh, no," he murmured, jumping up and starting for the hatch. "I knew it!"

The Wookiee grabbed him and tried to calm him down.

"I have every right to get upset!" Han exploded. "I'm running a smuggler ship, not a maternity ward!"

He pulled away from Chewbacca and charged into the main cabin. Only Terry and Randal were there, sitting at the chessboard. Terry looked forlorn and lost, much the same as Luke had looked after Kenobi had been killed. Randal had an arm around his son's shoulders, and was talking quietly to him. They glanced up as Solo skidded to a halt before them.

"Where are the others?" Han demanded.

"In one of the cabins," Randal said. "Captain Solo, I'm sorry this happened..."

Han ignored him and headed toward the sleeping quarters. Stopping at the first hatch, the one which led to his own cabin, he pressed his ear against the closed metal door, and heard voices within.

Just as he'd suspected. They'd turned his quarters into a delivery room!

Several minutes later, the Corellian was still there, pacing back and forth in the passageway as if he were the expectant father. The cabin door opened suddenly and Dona rushed out, but Han stopped her before she could run past him. "Hey — why did you put her in my cabin? You know where the medical station is!"

"I was aft when everything started happening. They put her in the closest cabin before I got here. Now it's too late to move her."

"But—"

"Han, let me go. I need to get a respirator."

"What for?" he said, trailing after her as she went to the main airlock.

"The baby is coming prematurely, you know. He might need some extra help in breathing."

Totally out of control of the situation, Solo watched as Dona grabbed the equipment she needed off the wall. "I told you this would happen, didn't I? Didn't I?"

The Cairnese woman paused to grin at him, her brilliant green eyes dancing. "Indeed you did. An excellent diagnosis, Doctor Solo."

Han groaned as Dona started back toward the sleeping quarters. "I hope you don't mind that we gave Elci some painkillers out of your medikit," she continued. "And, do you have a large, sharp knife?"

"Yeah, in the compartment above my bunk. But I don't like people riffling through my—"

"Han, please! This is an emergency!" More calmly, she added, "Where do you keep your sheets? I'll be sure to change your bunk for you after the baby's born."

Aghast, Solo stared at her, and Dona almost broke down laughing. "I really wish I had a holocamera. The look on your face is priceless!"

"How about a little more respect, sister?" Han shouted. "In case you've forgotten, this is my ship and—"

Rwandl patted his arm. "Sorry, Han. It's just that you're so much fun to tease." She turned to leave. "Captain Solo, sir, if you'll kindly give us permission to birth this baby on your ship, maybe Elci will decide to name him after you."

Han remained standing before the closed door after Dona had disappeared into his cabin again. He was definitely going to have to tell that woman who was boss aboard the Millennium Falcon before he took her on any more trips.

Then he considered the prospect of having a namesake. Not a bad idea, at that. Han started to beam. The little tyke couldn't ask for a better name!



Luke Skywalker sat at the head of a long table in an otherwise unoccupied briefing room, jotting down notes on the points he wanted to go over with the members of his command, Rogue Group, during an uncoming meeting. He was frowning in concentration, gnawing the end of his stylus, when he was interrupted by See-Threepio and Artoo Detoo.

"Oh, here you are, Master Luke!" the golden, human-like droid said as the door swished aside. "Artoo insisted that his sensors indicated a life form within this room, so we came in to investigate."

The silver-and-blue robot emitted a string of beeps and trills, and Luke grinned. He didn't need Threepio to tell him that Artoo was 'preening' over his accomplishment.

"Were you just testing Artoo's sensors, or did you want to see me about something?"

"The latter circumstance applies, Master Luke. You see, Captain Solo has returned from his journey. He told Artoo and me to find you as quickly as possible. He must see you about something exceedingly urgent, he says."

Luke sighed. He was pleased to hear that Solo had returned safely, and, if he had his 'druthers', he would have joined his friend without hesitation. Other considerations took precedence, however; he could no longer do only what he wanted to do. "Tell Han I'll be there — at the main dock, right? — in a couple of hours. I've got a—"

"But sir, he was most emphatic. . ." Threepio sounded worried.

"I can't go right now. I've got a briefing to conduct in an hour or so. I'm sure he'll understand." As the droid still hesitated, Luke smiled and added, "Don't worry, Threepio. If he takes you apart, I'll put you back together again."

"Oh, Master Luke, you don't really think—"

"No, just joking. Go on. Tell him I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Very well, sir." As the two droids exited, Artoo squealed something and his companion answered, "I am not afraid of Captain Solo! It's just that. . ." The door slid shut, cutting off the robots' voices from Skywalker's

hearing.

For a moment Luke wondered why Solo was in such a hurry, then forgot it as he glanced down at his scribbles. Realizing that he couldn't think of anything else to write down, he pushed the clipboard aside to reach for an information tape.

Not long afterward, he was deep in concentration in front of the tabletop viewer. It seemed like only a few minutes had passed when the door slid open again and he heard a familiar voice shouting his name.

"Kid, next time I send you word I've got an emergency on my hands, you'd better go into hyperspace getting to me!"

Luke's head jerked up. He grinned a greeting to Han, but couldn't keep his confusion from showing on his face. "I'm sorry, Han, but I've got a briefing to prepare for. My command's going on a survey mission tomorrow."

The Corellian walked over as Luke rose to his feet. His voice softened as he said, "Buddy, I know you're a busy bigshot commander. I wouldn't insist you drop everything unless it really was important."

Skywalker studied Han's expression a moment, then nodded. They headed out into the busy corridor together. "I guess I do have a little time," Luke said. "What's so urgent?"

"I've got six — no, make that seven — refugees from Tatooine aboard my ship, and I don't know what to do with them."

"Refugees?" Luke stopped cold in his tracks. "You call that an emergency? What do you want me to do? Leia's the one you should—"

"Their last name is Zeke. Ring a bell?"

Skywalker's blue eyes widened. "Oh, no," he said softly, then continued walking toward the main cruiser dock. "Han, what are they doing here?"

"Now you see the light! Don't know exactly, myself, kid. Dona Rwandl told me the Imperials were about to wipe them out because they're related to you."

Luke turned a horrified gaze on the Corellian. Han continued, "Maybe you'd better get the story from them. Things got so hectic aboard the Falcon that I never did find out what all. . ."

"Wait, Han," Luke said, counting mentally. "How could there be seven Zekes? There's Dori, Randal, Terry, and Joel. That's it."

"And the twins' wives."

"Wives?"

"Sure. Plus one of them had a baby boy on the way here." Han's expression looked slightly pained.

"Born on the Falcon?" Solo nodded, and Luke began to grin. "I'll bet you were thrilled about that!"

The Corellian shrugged. "It really wasn't too bad, I guess. Elci's named the kid after me."

"After you?" Luke stopped and convulsed with laughter.

Han shot him an exasperated look. "I don't know what's so funny. Seems to me they owed me something for saving their asses. The baby's full name is 'MerlHan' after me and another guy on Tatooine who helped them get away."

"That's an awful name!" Luke managed to control himself, and remarked, "Must be for Merl Darklighter."

"I think I heard that name mentioned. The kid's dad wanted to name him just 'Merl', but Elci insisted on my name too. I think she and Aeslyn have taken a shine to me."

"Don't let it go to your head. You don't need two jealous husbands on your case. Especially not those two."

After a few minutes silent walking, Han said blithely, "Course, I guess you could say I saved eight Zekes. Lyn's pregnant, too."

Luke blinked, then said, "I guess I'm not really surprised. The twins have always done everything together. . . ." Han smirked, and Skywalker added, "You know what I mean. And they never did believe in wasting any time."

"By the way, they're not in very good moods. They're mad because they had to leave Tatooine. Thought I'd better warn you."

"Thanks." Luke paused, then muttered. "I just can't wait to see the reception I get."



When they entered the Millennium Falcon, Han remained by the main cabin's hatchway, leaning against a bulkhead and crossing his arms, while Luke walked over to kiss his cousin and shake Randal's hand. "It's good to see you again," he said, hugging Dori consolingly. "I just wish the circumstances were more pleasant." Skywalker looked over at Joel and Terry, who were seated at the game board, absent-mindedly experimenting with the holo-chess pieces. "Hi, twins," he said, a little hesitantly.

They sent him one baleful glance, then returned their attention to the bizarre contortions and confrontations of the 'creatures' before them.

Luke frowned, but decided not to say anything about Joel's and Terry's rudeness. "Han told me the twins' wives are here, too?" he said to Dori, looking around.

"Yes. The boys got married right after you and Kaili left Tatooine last year. Dona's taking Elci, Aeslyn and the baby to the infirmary. Then she's going to find us a place to stay on your ship. Did Captain Solo tell you about the baby, by the way?"

"He sure did," Luke replied. "Congratulations, Grandma!"

Dori began to smile, but her pleasure faded as Joel stood up and growled, "She shouldn't be a grandmother for a standard month yet. And it's no thanks to you, Skywalker, that my wife and Merl are all right, in spite of what happened!"

"The name's 'MerlHan'," Han interposed.

Terry rose and glared at the Corellian. "You keep out of this, Captain. You're not one of our family."

Luke looked worriedly at his friend, but fortunately Han didn't seem disposed to join in the fracas. He simply shrugged and maintained his watchful pose.

Before the young commander could say anything, Randal said, "Boys, there's no reason for this hostility. Captain Solo helped save our lives — you should be thankful to him. And none of this is Luke's fault."

"The hell it's not," Joel snapped. "If he'd stayed on the farm, instead of running around the galaxy playing hero, none of us would be out here in the middle of nowhere."

Luke was bewildered by the twins' animosity. Although they had never been very friendly to him, and as children had teased him mercilessly for his 'highflown' ambitions, he'd thought that time and maturity would have smoothed over the old antagonisms. Apparently, though, he was wrong.

"If I'd stayed on the farm, I couldn't have given it to you," he observed sardonically. "Now, would you mind telling me what this is all about?" He turned to Randal. "Maybe you can give me a rational explanation."

Randal nodded and proceeded to enlighten Luke about the Imperials' intentions to lure Luke back to Tatooine. As Zeke told the story, Skywalker could see the twins' expressions becoming thunderous, but he chose to ignore them.

"This sounds pretty serious," he said as Randal finished. "I'll have to talk to Dona and General Rieekan. It's odd that the Imperials know so much about me."

"You're only worried about your own skin," Terry broke in. "What about us? Did it ever occur to you that because you've got the Imps after you, we're the ones who suffer?"

Luke tried to answer patiently, although his temper was starting a slow burn. "Look, I am sorry about what happened. But there's nothing I can do about it. If you'd think a minute, you'd see that. I'm sure the Alliance will be able to resettle you, and probably on a better planet than Tatooine."

"We don't want a better planet — we want our farm!"

Skywalker took a deep breath, then turned to Solo. "Han, do me favor, please. See if you can find Kaili. She's probably in engineering or—"

Han didn't budge. "Now, just hold it right there. It's bad enough I've become the Alliance's Official Chauffeur. I'm not going to start playing Messenger Boy, too. Besides, Dona'll probably get her."

Still obsessed with venting his frustration, Terry shouted, "And what about our new farm equipment, huh? We're in hock but good for that. Even if we do go back someday, it's your fault our credit rating'll be zilch!"

"I wouldn't worry about that," Luke retorted. "They'll probably just repossess everything."

As the twins' faces reddened in renewed fury, Han

asked, "Kid, does saying the wrong thing come naturally, or do you practice?" Luke whirled to glare at him, and the Corellian jerked away from the bulkhead. "Uh, I'll go find Kaili. Okay?" As he made his way toward the airlock, Luke heard him add, "Gods! Kid's got a worse temper than me, sometimes."

Luke turned his attention back to his cousins. "If you two can't talk rationally, it's no use for me to say anything more." He started to leave. "I'm sorry our reunion turned out this way," he said to Dori and Randal. "I'm leaving here tomorrow, but I'll try to see you again before I go."

The twins' parents nodded sadly, unhappy about the events of the past few minutes.

"Just a minute, Luke," Joel called.

The young commander paused by the hatch.

"If the only thing that had gone wrong was the property transfer procedures, and if we'd been able to contact you, would you have come back to help us?"

Luke walked back into the room, hoping he could reason with the twins this time. "Joel, I would have if I could. But this is a military organization and I can't just go when I feel like it. . ."

"'But' nothing!" Terry said, banging his fist on the table. "You wouldn't have even considered coming. The great hero Luke Skywalker doesn't have time for his poor relations. He doesn't care any more about us than the Empire does!"

"Yeah. He's too busy chasing a pipedream about being a Jedi knight," Joel taunted. "Too stupid to figure out that some mythological 'Force' isn't going to ever do a damn bit of good for him or us or anyone else!"

Luke's temper peaked. All he wanted to do was shut the twins up, push them away — and the thought was enough. Joel and Terry suddenly stumbled back against the chess table, breaking their fall only by flinging their arms out and clinging to the board and the padding of the semi-circular bench.

"There — is that a pipedream?" Luke shouted.

"Luke, don't!" Dori cried, running to him and seizing his hand. Skywalker looked into his elder cousin's frightened eyes and snapped out of the rage that had momentarily possessed him.

"I — I'm sorry," he said, looking at her, then Randal, then at the twins. As they all recovered from the shock, he held out his other hand toward Joel and Terry, apologizing, "I've never done anything like that before — I didn't mean to. . ."

"I guess it is real," Terry said slowly, hitching up against the bench's back. "But that's all you do, isn't it — throw your almighty weight around."

Joel picked himself up from the deck. "You and Aunt Kai handed Mom all that guff. 'The Alliance is going to protect you, so you can keep on living normal lives. It'll make everything wonderful'," he mimicked in a high voice. "Well, Terry was right. If you're any example, Skywalker, your precious Alliance is no better than the Empire."

Luke was silent, more dismayed by this than by anything else the twins had said. Suddenly, he wasn't sure that Joel and Terry were wrong in their opinion of him.

Had he lost sight of the Alliance's purpose? Was his head so swelled by his rapid advancement in the rebel ranks that he'd forgotten why he'd joined in the first place? The Alliance's ideology, and the Jedi knights', was in part concerned with helping people who were defenseless against the Empire's oppressions. Yet, here were four of the oppressed before him — and he wasn't at all sure that he would have deigned to help them, had it been in his power to do so.

If Han, or Leia, or anyone else he really cared about was in trouble, Luke knew there would be no question in his mind about aiding them in any way he could. But he didn't like Joel and Terry. That fact shouldn't make a difference; apparently, however, it did. . .to him.

You work hard as an Alliance commander and use every chance you get to learn about the Force. Is all that practicing with your lightsaber the most important thing about being a Jedi?

He stood in agonized contemplation for so long that at last Randal said, "Luke, why don't you go see if Kaili's on the way. Dori and I'll take care of these two."

Luke nodded and left wordlessly. After making his way out of the dock into the cruiser, he paused in the corridor by a wall comlink. Tonight, I'd better hit Ben's journals again, and read over the philosophy parts I've been skipping 'til now. Sighing, he activated the com and notified his command that he was on his way to the conference room.

Before he could leave the area, however, he met Han, Kaili and Dona, who were on their way to the Falcon. Luke glared at his cousin. "Where were you when I needed you?"

"What?" Kaili said, puzzled.

"You're the one who wants to be a Jedi counselor," Skywalker continued irritably. "You go see if you can calm those idiots down." He sighed and rubbed his forehead. "Talking to those twins is worse than talking to Uncle Owen. They have two mouths to yell with."

Kaili gazed keenly at him a moment, and pursed her lips. "My mother used to tell you, and I'm telling you now, to just ignore them. They can't get under your skin unless you let them." She stepped closer to him and added, "Luke, this must be what those premonitions of mine were all about."

"Yeah. Next time, be more specific, so I can develop a thicker skin."

Kaili smiled, then turned to Han. "Captain Solo, I appoint you deputy counselor. See if you can cheer him up, fast; he's got a briefing to conduct."

"And I'm late," Luke said, starting away. Kaili waved goodbye as she and Dona continued on toward the dock.

Han accompanied the young commander, putting a brotherly arm around Luke's shoulders. "Don't let 'em bother you, buddy. They're probably still shellshocked over leaving home, that's all. Believe me, whatever they

said can't come close to what I went through with those women!"



The Zekes were in the midst of a major argument, parents against sons, when they heard footsteps in the dock which connected the Falcon to the gigantic rebel cruiser. Moments later, Kaili and Dona entered the main cabin and stood silently near the doorway, survey the grim faces before them. Kaili then glanced at her friend, and Dona, taking the tacit hint, said, "Well, I'd better go to my cabin and get my gear. See you later."

"Thanks for everything, Dona," Kaili said.

Dona smiled and headed toward the crew quarters, as Kaili walked over to her sister and encircled her with her arms.

"I know it's hard to bear," the blonde woman said gently into Dori's dark, grey-streaked hair. "But we'll take care of you. Everything will be all right—"

"The hell it will!" Joel broke into Kaili's comforting murmur. "Nothing will be okay, ever again, thanks to—"

Randal stepped forward, his face reddening in anger. "I've heard you blame Luke one time too many," he shouted. "Either talk sensibly, or—"

Kaili left her sister and imposed herself between Randal and the twins. "Hush," she said. "You're all tired, and overwrought. Come to my cabin and have something to eat, if you like. Then we'll all sit down and talk about this."

The Zekes stared at her, Joel and Terry about to shout more deprecations. But they felt the impulse die under their aunt's calm blue gaze. Nodding dejectedly, they bowed their heads and followed Kaili and their parents out of the Falcon.

It took several minutes to reach Kaili's cabin, through long corridors and swiftly-moving lifttubes, past huge hangar bays and workrooms that, under other circumstances, the twins might have found fascinating. But now their sight was turned inward, focused upon their loss and anger; it was all they could do to put one foot ahead of the other.

The twins finally glanced about when they reached Kaili's cabin, finding a tiny room with dull grey walls. Two upholstered chairs and a lampstand were the only furnishings.

"Where are we supposed to sit?" Joel asked sullenly.

"You two can use those chairs," Kaili said, motioning to the elder Zekes to follow her. "Dori, you and Randal look about dead on your feet. You can lie down in the bedroom for a while, until I can bring some food."

"Where's your husband?" Dori asked weakly, as they headed for the adjoining room.

"Brett's working. You'll meet him later, after you've had a good rest."

"And where's Aeslyn?" Terry asked as he sank into one of the seats.

Kaili stopped to answer his question. "I sent a messenger droid to bring her here from the infirmary. I didn't think it would take this long, but. . ."

"Stupid droid probably got lost, or broke down," the blond twin grumbled.

"I doubt that," Kaili said, grinning. "It's not a Tatooine droid!" Her smile faded as her nephews glared at her, then looked down at their laps.

"You have the same talent for saying the wrong thing as Luke does," Randal remarked.

"Sorry," Kaili said as she led the elder Zekes into the bedroom, leaving the twins to gaze at each other silently, their anger not spent, but dormant for the time being.

Moments later, the outer door slid open, admitting Aeslyn. She went over to Terry, settling herself comfortably into his lap and kissing him. "Hello! Did you ever see anything like this ship? Isn't it exciting? Oh, Joel, Elci and MerlHan are fine — she gave him his first feeding, and now they're both asleep. Did you know they have droids as medics here? Weirdest thing you ever saw—"

"Shut up, Lyn!" Terry snapped.

Aeslyn's jaw dropped in dismay, then she frowned at her husband and brother-in-law. "Aren't you two over the doldrums yet? By the suns, you should be grateful we're all alive and safe, and—"

"Well, I'm glad at least one of you is optimistic," Kaili's voice broke in.

As the twins' aunt joined them in the sitting room, Aeslyn rose and held out her hands. "You must be Aunt Kaili."

"Yes, Aeslyn, it's good to meet you." Kaili smiled, taking Aeslyn's hands and kissing her cheek. "Did I hear you say Elci and the child are well?"

"Yes, they're fine."

"Well, then, we've nothing to do but have a little family reunion." Kaili opened a wall compartment to the right of the outer door, and removed two folding stools. "I'm afraid this is all I've got in the way of extra seats. . ."

Terry rose and motioned Aeslyn to take his place in the chair, unfolding the stool that Kaili handed him and sinking down on it. As Kaili settled herself on the other seat, he said to her in an irritable tone, "Why do you wear your hair like that?"

Kaili's head jerked up, and she touched her blonde braids in puzzlement. "It's the current style here." She smiled wistfully and added, "Looped braids were the traditional women's hairstyle on Alderaan. We honor the memory of the martyred planet."

"What made you ask that, Terry?" Aeslyn said.

"It looks strange on her." He glanced back at his aunt. "You're from Tatooine. You should keep your hair cut short."

"Who are you to dictate to me? I don't think it looks strange. And I'm not from Tatooine. Not anymore."

Kaili gazed at Terry and Joel through slitted eyes for a long moment, then folded her hands in her lap. "Now, tell me why Luke was so upset after he talked to you two."

Aeslyn straightened in her seat. "What happened?"

"I'm not sure, though I have my suspicions."

"Are they still blaming Luke for our problems at home?" Aeslyn turned on her husband. "Are you?" she demanded.

"Yeah, why shouldn't we?" Terry said defiantly. "And he has no reason to be upset with us — not after what he did!"

"He knocked us both down, Aunt Kai," Joel added.

Kaili scowled. "You two sound like little kids tattle-telling. Come now, you're both taller and heavier than he is, how could he—"

Joel swallowed and looked away. "He . . . he didn't do it physically."

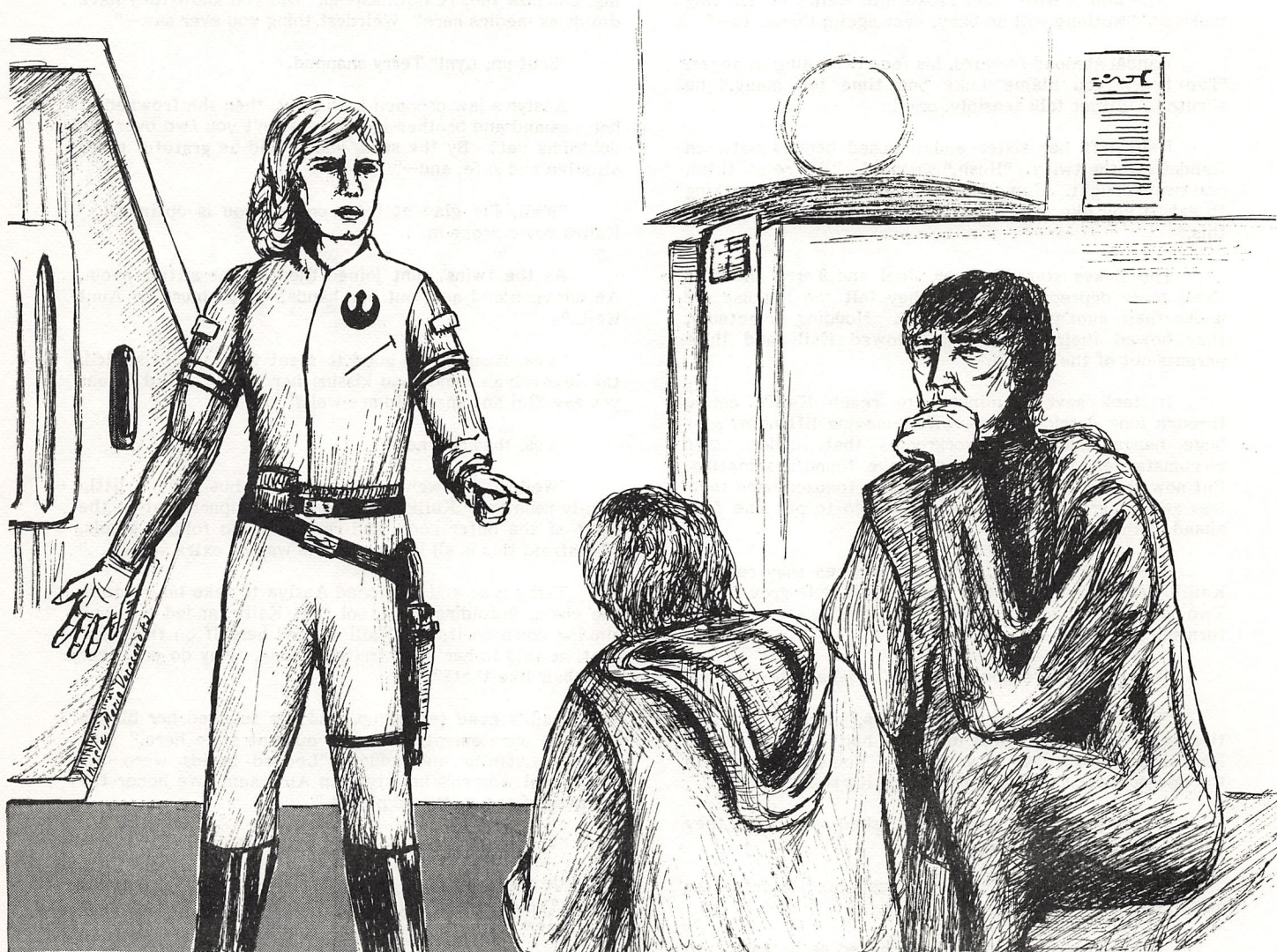
Their aunt looked blank a second, then she paled as comprehension dawned.

"I suppose that's okay with you, though, Aunt Kai," Terry said caustically. "Your so-righteous cousin can do no wrong."

"What are you talking about?" Aeslyn interjected, sounding exasperated.

Kaili shot her a peculiar look, then glanced back at the twins. Her expression was carefully neutral, but they had the sensation that wrath was slowly building up underneath the enforced calm.

"No, I don't condone Luke's using the Force in that way," she said coolly. "But what did you say to make him lash out at you?"



"The Force. . ." Aeslyn sank back in her seat, nodding thoughtfully.

Joel and Terry ignored them both; they frowned and stared at the wall. But then, their eyes snapped back to gaze in sudden fear at their aunt as she rose from her chair and turned her back on them. Although they couldn't see her face, they somehow knew that she was enraged. Her anger seemed to shimmer palpably in the air between them, much the same as Luke's had just before they'd been pushed into that uncanny tumble.

"All right, don't answer me," Kaili said at last, her voice dangerously soft. "I can imagine what you said from the hints Luke and your parents gave me." She whirled to face them, eyes flashing. "When are you two going to grow up?" she demanded. "You've got wives and children, adult responsibilities, yet you won't bother to think logically, or try to adapt yourselves to change. When things don't go exactly the way you want, you whine and blame others for your bad fortune. Will you ever learn to think before saying idiotic things?"

The twins' anger wilted under their aunt's glare. Finally, Joel said in a weak voice, "You've got to admit that if Luke hadn't joined the rebels, we'd still have our farm."

"I suppose you're going to tell me next that Luke joined the Alliance just to spite you!" Kaili retorted. "It's ridiculous to blame him. If you must blame someone for this, blame the Imperials. They're responsible for your troubles — and Luke is pledged to fight them!"

The older woman returned to her seat and leaned forward. "Ever since you were little, you've teased Luke just because he didn't think exactly like you. It's high time you quit it. When you both admit that each individual must fulfill his own dream, and has the right to choose his own path, then maybe your wives and parents and I will have reason to believe you're maturing, at last."

There followed a long silence as the twins considered their aunt's words. Each reluctantly realized there was no reason to rant about Luke any longer, unless they were determined to be stubborn, refusing to face the unwelcome new life ahead.

Finally, Terry choked out, "We were happy on the farm. We. . .didn't want to leave."

Joel could say nothing. Both bowed their heads and tried to hold back tears. Now that they could no longer use unjustified rage at Luke as a shield, their frustration, sorrow, and terror at their uprooting weighed them down almost unbearably.

Suddenly they felt a change in Kaili's mood. A flow of compassion, encouragement, and affection flowed through and dispelled her anger, like a refreshing breeze through sultry desert air. They looked up when Kaili took Joel's hands in hers. Aeslyn stared at the older woman in amazement as she wrapped her arms around her husband.

"I know it hurts," Kaili said softly. "I went through a difficult period of adjustment when I left home eleven years ago. And I can tell you, from first-hand experience, that you can adjust to a new life. The only thing that can defeat you is deciding that you can't."

Both Joel's and Terry's grief was dispersing, slowly replaced by the realization that life would go on, might

even be worthwhile, if they simply took a more positive attitude. But they knew that adaptation would take a long time.

"It won't be easy," Kaili nodded, answering their unspoken thoughts.

Aeslyn leaned toward her and said, "Aunt Kai. . .is it just my imagination that we've been feeling your. . .your moods?"

Kaili glanced down at her lap, then looked at her niece a little shyly. "You're not imagining it. I'm empathic. What you feel now is a Support Bond. . .it's something I learned from a Jedi friend, many years ago."

The twins felt a bit uncomfortable at hearing this, but Aeslyn smiled and said, "We appreciate your help."

Kaili nodded and returned her attention to Joel and Terry. "I have faith in you," she said. "You've got some Skywalker in you, too — it's buried awful deep, but it's there somewhere. Just look at your future as a great adventure, and you'll make it, Empire or no Empire."

"I think our Zeke and Lars sides'll be able to adapt, too," Terry said, a little defensively.

Kaili laughed. "I'm sure. After all, they colonized Tatooine. That was a very brave deed!"

Late the next morning, ship's time, Princess Leia asked Luke and Han to meet with her concerning the refugees' plight. Randal Zeke attended too, to represent his family at the conference.

"This situation sets a precedent that I'm not any too happy about," the princess said worriedly after they were seated at the briefing room's table. "It's not a good idea to have non-Alliance personnel — and a tiny child — aboard this vessel. For one thing, it's a breach of security. . ."

Zeke's brow was furrowed, but he answered Leia calmly. "Princess Organa, I assure you that my family is no happier about this than you are. But I don't think you have to worry about us giving away your hiding place. None of us are astronomical experts; we haven't the faintest idea where in the galaxy we are."

Leia's expression relaxed, and she smiled apologetically. "I didn't mean to insinuate that we begrudge your family sanctuary, Mr. Zeke. I'm glad we could help you escape from the Imperials. Not all of our loved ones are that fortunate." For a moment, the princess' eyes reflected her painful memory of Alderaan's demise, then she continued, "I was simply thinking aloud that we'd better set up a policy for dealing with refugees, especially if the rumors of a new purge turn out to be true. I'll put it on the agenda for the next chiefs-of-staff meeting."

"Are there any sympathetic governments which can take immigrants on short notice?" Luke asked.

"That's one idea I had, too," Leia agreed. "Which brings us to our present situation. We have to find a new home for your family. Mr. Zeke, do you have any preference about where to go? If not, we can contact some of our allies, see if we can find you a place. . ."

"Both my wife and I were born on Tatooine. Our families lost all contact with relatives on other planets long ago. The only place the twins and I could think of is Ladaan. My daughter-in-law Aeslyn has a brother there who might be willing to sponsor us for immigration. Would Ladaan be convenient — and safe — to transport us to, Your Highness?"

Leia considered this for a while, then nodded slowly. "Yes, Ladaan may be feasible. In which city does this acquaintance of yours live?"

"I believe he's in a small town not far from Achayakol. I'll check with Lyn."

The princess turned to Solo, who was lounging back on two legs of his chair. "Han, is there a spaceport in Achayakol?"

"Yeah, I've been there lots of times. They've got a terrific black market for—"

Leia cut him off. "Perhaps we could make Ladaan the first stop on my diplomatic rounds," she said thoughtfully.

The Corellian sat up with a snap. "Diplomatic rounds? I thought I was just here to find out where I'd be taking the Zekes!"

Leia eyed him slyly. "Well, no. Not exactly. You see, Han, we have to secure some financial support and supply sources for the new main base. What use is it for Luke and his squadron to find us a good location if we can't build anything once we get there?"

"So you just assumed I'd squire you round the galaxy!"

"Based on your actions of the past year, it seemed a safe assumption."

Solo opened his mouth to argue further, then closed it and shrugged. "Ah, what's the use," he said, scowling. "Okay, Your Worship, but you'd better get your forgers to change my ship's registration again. And while they're at it, they can change her name to the Millennium Ferry."

The other three laughed, then Leia turned to Randal. "Very well, Mr. Zeke. Ladaan it is. Perhaps you'd like to inform your family that we'll be departing tomorrow, after our forgers make your new IDs."

"I'll do that, Princess. Thank you for your help." Randal rose and beckoned to Skywalker. "Luke, could you show me how to get back to the infirmary? That's where everyone is at the moment."

Luke headed with him to the door. "I should say goodbye to them before I leave on the mission."

"Oh, and Luke," Han called, "how 'bout telling Aeslyn she can't have her baby until after she's on Ladaan."

Luke dimpled. "Don't you want another namesake?"

"No!"

"Don't worry, Captain," Randal said. "I think Lyn is better at taking stress than Elci is. Besides, she's not due for three months yet."

"I've heard that line before," the Corellian mumbled.

They left the briefing room, after Luke promised to stop back and see Han and Leia before departing. As they picked their way through bustling groups of rebel workers, Randal said, "Ladaan should be a good place to settle. They've been having problems with desertification there, I hear, so the boys and I should be able to get ecology technician jobs without much trouble."

Luke looked at him a little curiously. "It sounds as if you don't mind leaving Tatooine."

"You're wrong, Luke. I'm just resigned — and it's best to get quickly back to work, instead of moping about might-have-beens."

"I wish Joel and Terry thought that way."

Randal kept quiet while they entered a lift and Luke programmed it for the infirmary level. Then he said, "They've got their grandfather's stubbornness. . .but they'll recover from the shock eventually, too. They want to talk to you again, by the way."

Luke nodded, mentally bracing himself for another shouting match. And for controlling his own temper and its side effects.

Upon entering the infirmary Luke found Kaili seated near Elci's hospital bed by the large, square porthole, and holding little MerlHan. Dona and Aeslyn were fussing over him, while Joel and Terry stood nearby, patiently enduring the women's 'silliness'. Kaili's husband, Brett Karaga, was talking with Dori. Luke suddenly realized that this would be the first time that the Alderaani had met Kaili's sister's family.

Randal joined Dori and Brett, while Luke walked over and introduced himself to the twins' wives. "Yes, we've heard a lot about you," Elci said, smiling at him.

"I'll bet you have," Luke said dryly. He bent to peer at the tiny boy on Kaili's lap. "He looks like you, Elci; with all that black hair, he'll need a haircut next week!" Kaili lifted the baby toward him. "No, I don't want to hold him," he said, backing away. "I might drop him or something."

Kaili chuckled. "You can blow up the Death Star, but you're afraid of a little baby."

"Well, I don't know much about them," Luke protested. He looked at the child again and shook his head. "MerlHan. What a ridiculous name!"

"I think it's kind of cute," Aeslyn said. "And I'm going to follow suit — my baby's name'll be 'DonaKai' after the two women who saved our lives."

Skywalker frowned. "I can understand the 'Dona' part. But how did Kaili help?"

"She kept Joel and Terry from murdering a certain Alliance commander."

Luke glanced at the twins, who had the grace to look sheepish. "Yeah, she really lit into us," Joel admitted.

"Uh, Luke, can we step out into the corridor and talk a minute?" Terry said.

The young commander nodded and followed the twins outside the infirmary. Once there, Joel and Terry stared at the floor, their faces a bit crimson. Luke crossed his arms and waited; he knew that admitting they were wrong would be just as hard for the twins as it had always been for Uncle Owen.

Finally Joel said, "Luke, Aunt Kai said we should learn to keep our mouths shut when we're mad, and think before we say stupid things. We, uh, we really don't hate you, or blame you for losing our farm. I guess."

"She also said, 'Each individual must choose his own way of life'. Looks like we can't choose ours right now, but. . ." Terry frowned, then added, a bit grudgingly, "Anyway, if you want to flit around the galaxy in a souped-up T-16, I suppose that's your right, and we shouldn't needle you about it."

"Did Kaili put it that way?" said Luke.

"Well, no. I put it that way."

Skywalker laughed. "It's okay. The guys back home in Anchorhead used to tease me about wanting to be a star pilot. I should be used to it by now." He considered that a moment, then went on. "If I'd have thought, I would have realized how traumatic leaving home like that was for you."

"I still can't believe this isn't some kind of nightmare," Joel said, sighing. "Everything we worked so hard for—" He and Terry glanced at each other, then stared at the floor.

Luke nodded. "I'm sorry you got mixed up in this. I really wish we could have kept you out of it." He paused, then went on ruefully, "I also owe you an apology for using the Force against you. It happened almost before I knew it, though."

"Yeah," Joel said. "That was. . . weird."

"Sure was. Nothing like that has ever happened to me before. I didn't know how to control it. Normally, I find levitation hard to do, but all that emotion seemed to make it easier. . . ." Luke's voice trailed off as he realized that his cousins were eying him uneasily and seeming to draw away, although they hadn't actually moved. Skywalker cleared his throat. "Anyway, I should thank you for bringing some faults I have to my attention. Maybe now I can correct them."

Terry shuffled his feet. "I guess Joel and I could use a little character improvement ourselves."

The three young men gazed at each other, all appearing a bit embarrassed at the turn in the conversation. After a moment, Luke stuck out his hand. "Friends?"

Terry started to smile. "Friends." First he, then Joel, shook hands with Luke.

"Good luck in your new home on Ladaan," said Skywalker. "And, I promise you that after the Empire's overthrown, I'll do everything I can to help you establish your rights to the farm on Tatooine, if you still want to go back."

"We will," Joel said with assurance. "Thanks, Luke. Now we have a good reason for hoping you live through this war of yours."

Skywalker's mouth dropped open in dismay, and the twins threw back their heads, roaring with laughter. "We're just teasing," Terry said. "Between you and Merl Darklighter, maybe we'll salvage Grandpa's place after all."

"I hope so. That farm is still 'home' to me too, in a way." Luke glanced at the infirmary door. "Well, I'd better go back in there and say goodbye to everyone."

After making his farewells, Luke walked briskly from the infirmary, feeling strangely glad to be away from his relatives again. At first he couldn't figure out the reason. He was happy that he was on somewhat better terms with the twins now, and he genuinely loved his foster sisters. It made him feel good to know that somewhere in the galaxy there were people he could call family.

Then why this relief at leaving them? After a while he deduced it was the differences between his way of thinking and the Zekes' that made him uncomfortable. They were 'planetbound', wanting nothing more than a quiet, secure home and a routine existence. Only with Kaili did he feel a degree of mental kinship. She shared his beliefs and knew something of what it was like to be attuned to the Force. But even with her. . . Luke frowned. He knew that Kaili looked forward to the defeat of the Empire mainly so that she and Brett could settle down at last on a nice planet, and start a family. She wasn't very different from the Zekes, at that.

Luke, however, never again wanted to be bound to one world. He knew that even after the Imperials were defeated, he would wish always to soar freely amidst the stars, following his destiny and allowing the Force to guide him. In this, he felt that Han and Leia were his true relatives, not those with whom he shared blood ties.

Skywalker sighed and decided to put philosophical musings behind him. Just as it was time for the Zekes to find a new home on Ladaan, it was time for him to concentrate on finding a new home for his fellow Alliance members.

Stepping into the lift, Luke instructed it to transport him to the hangar deck. He intended to don his orange flight suit and run a final check on his X-wing, readying both it and himself for whatever the stars might demand.

PILOT BOOTS

(to "Thirsty Boots" by Eric Andersen)

GATONPAULIS

You've long been flying X-wing ships;
You've been sleeping not at all.
There've been angry words and heavy loss
Of rebel men on call.
But the pilots dead and the men you've lost
Will not have died in vain.
So only stop, and rest yourself
Till you are off again.

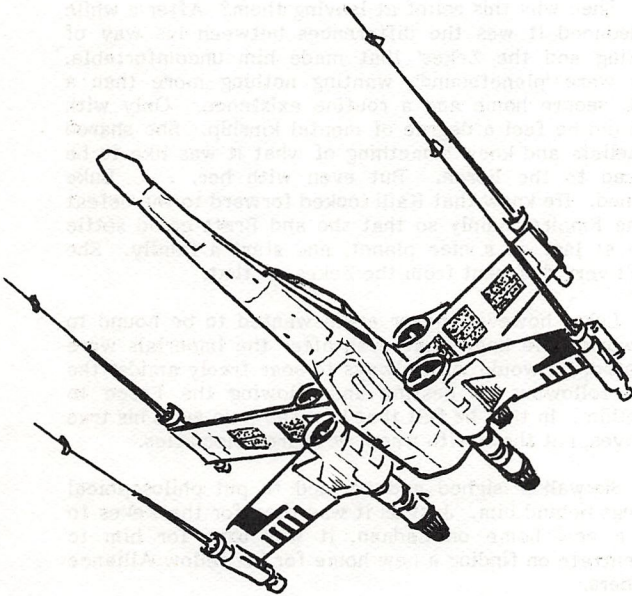
CHORUS: So take off your pilot boots
And stay for the night.
Your body's hot and weary
From another fight.
And maybe I can make you laugh
And take away some pain.
Stop looking to be brave, then,
And I'll make you whole again.

Let's talk about the things you saw:
The carnage out in space;
The fighters blown to glowing bits
By TIES they couldn't outrace;
The burning main base fortresses
That for a while were home
While rebel transports, one by one,
Begin again to roam.

(CHORUS)

I know you are no stranger
To the horrors of friends dead.
From Tatooine to Persephii
Your heart, it freely bled.
But voices call within the mind:
Fight on, you must prevail.
For all of them, and more, my friend,
The Force will not be failed.

(CHORUS)



Hear the Echo Lonely

Marcia Brin

He awoke sweating, fighting his way out of the grip of some formless dream. He reached for Marion, but her place was empty. He wondered where she was until he realized that daylight was peeping around the edges of the windowshade. Probably getting ready to face the day. It had been good last night — and bad. Memories. It had stirred memories. . . .

A soft oath escaped him and he sat up abruptly. Get the hell off that track; you know where it leads. He stood up and stretched — a feline ripple of muscle — and caught his reflection in the mirror over the dresser. Marion would be very surprised if she knew his true age; he just didn't age as fast as anyone else did here.

Here. He was a stranger here, always would be, no matter how long he stayed — and he had already been here quite a while — or how hard he tried. He was trying; he had no other choice. There was no going back. Ever.

He felt the familiar stab of pain. Stop it, damn you. Why do you keep doing this to yourself? Face it. Admit it. Hell, he had admitted it. He just couldn't live with it sometimes.

Glancing at the clock, he started for the bathroom. It was time he was getting ready, too. First class started soon. Professor Indiana Jones, archaeologist. Gods, was there ever a time, in his flaming youth, when he could have envisioned himself as a teacher? He had learned his profession on the job; his background had been faked. It had been easy. Amazing what technology could do.

Indiana Jones. Sometimes it was hard to believe he'd ended up with that moniker. When he'd been learning, he found out that his own name, once just a per-

sonal identification to him, had a meaning here and, as he struggled to become proficient in the tongue — and to fit in — it had become confusing on occasion. Not wishing to draw too much attention to himself in those days, he had changed it. Unusual as his first name might be, it was readily accepted, and for the reason he had chosen it: his location at the time. Later, though, he had realized that, while not common, there were others with his own surname and that he could have kept it. By then, however, he was forging his new identity and could not change back.

Besides, it helped to make a clean break with the past.

A voice suddenly lifting in song stopped him. Marion. In the kitchen. He was sorry he'd hurt her, back then, but he had not been able to commit himself to another woman. Now, well — now he had been here much longer and he had finally come to believe that the door was closed forever. He had to start to really care again, to risk his emotions once more.

Problem was, Marion made him remember too much. They were a lot alike, those two; they shared some very special qualities. Some part of him was afraid that he would hurt Marion again; that he did not really love her for herself, but for how much she made him think of. . .

Stop! Stop, stop, stop, stop. Fool! He cursed his stupidity as the dark-haired, dark-eyed image rose before him. Why? Damn it, why? For the first time in his life, everything had been going so well. The fighting had ended and they were starting to build. Together.

And surrounded by the people he loved.



All gone now. Lost in a single moment. Casually destroyed by the whim of an indifferent god. He was here, and they were there. So distant, lost in the endless night.

Sometimes, his despair led him to wonder if he were remembered, but it was easy to banish that thought. He knew he would be, always, and it was the only thing that eased his mind during the dark times.

A restlessness grabbed him. He knew he was due for another attack of homesickness; all the signs were there. There were times when he didn't hear people talking to him, when he drifted away into the past. Earthbound. Too long earthbound. If he could not go home, he could still fly.

He thought of his metal bird, sitting where he kept it hidden. Time to take her out again, blow the earth-dust from my mind. Forget, for a while, that he was trapped.

He'd take her out tomorrow; give Marion some excuse and punch in the co-ordinates for the warp

location — that damned sealed doorway; that cursed one-way trip — and head out. The Falcon would get there in no time. There was always the chance, even after all this time, that the warp would open again and he could go home the same way he had come. No other path would get him home. He did not even know where his galaxy was, out there, but it was not a companion to this one.

Torn between a desperate desire to stop hurting and an equally desperate need to remember who he was — had been — and what he'd lost, he would go again among the stars — as he used to, but alone now, only a crew of ghosts to travel with him. He would hear his footsteps echo lonely in the Falcon, and marvel at how empty she seemed; and he would remember their voices and their touch.

And maybe he would sit by that damned warp and get drunk while their images danced before him and his pain burned like a raging fire.

And — maybe — he would cry.

Petition

Guardian of the Past,
Return to me my Captain
(He-who-was-my-friend).
Replace this iron automaton
Who now bestrides his decks
And wears his face,
Yet lacks his heart and soul.
I do not know what mishap
Has transformed him;
I should not have let him go alone
To Erinys, that dark and bloody planet,
But go he did...despite my protests...
And it is this cold-eyed stranger
With his face who has returned.
Turn back, roll back
The coiling mists of time,
For I must have my Captain back
(He-who-is-my-friend).

Starshine on deep-moving water
Gilding the shadows,
Concealing the depths
With a reflective glow.
Unseen eddies swirling swiftly
Into their accustomed pattern,
Swift cold currents
Of implacable logic form
An irresistible force
Sweeping down to the sea.
Glimmering, shimmering, limitless blue
Stretching to unseen horizons;
Mercurial, magical, passionate blue —
A tidal wave of emotion.
Exuberant in its salty fury,
It rushes headlong and laughing
To enfold the river.

Reflections on a Mirror

In some ways,
I envy
That other Captain Kirk,
However strange and savage
His universe might be.

For I am forced
To abstinence,
Denied those earthy pleasures
So bountifully provided
By his 'Captain's Woman'.

I dare not be
Accessible,
For that might make me
Vulnerable,
Stripped of my shining armor
Of invincible command,
And so reveal the feet of clay
On which their captain stands.

Dayle S.
Barker

THE CALL TO WAR

JANI HICKS

(to "Story of Issac" by Leonard Cohen)

A TALE OF THE CONTRAVERSE
from the Journals of Sharna Kenobi Skywalker

The door it opened slowly, and the Master he came in;
my eyes could not behold.
And he stood so far above me, and his blue eyes they were flashing,
but his voice was very cold.
He said, "I've had a vision, and although I'm far from holy,
I must do as I've been told."
So he started to the temple, we were standing there beside him,
and he seemed to gleam like gold.

"You who face the altar now," he said unto his children,
"some will see me here no more;
For you, too, will have a vision, and may very well be tempted,
for you face an open door.
Yes, you who stand beside me now, your sabers drawn and ready,
we have been here before."
And he bowed his head in silence, and his wrinkled hands were trembling
with the burden that they bore.

"And if they claim your service, make a stop along the way —
it's all within the plan;
For when all has come to dust, they will kill you if they must;
they will love you if they can.
And may you never learn to scorn the galaxy not yet reborn.
Each woman and each man,
Bring blessings on your uniform; child of peace, child of war."
One ended, one began.

Dark Knight of the Soul

Paula Block

To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,
You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.
In order to arrive at what you do not know
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.
In order to possess what you do not possess
You must go by the way of dispossession.
In order to arrive at what you are not
You must go through the way in which you are not.
And what you do not know is the only thing you know
And what you own is what you do not own
And where you are is where you are not.*

An incredible surge of energy lashed through Luke Skywalker's mind as the Millennium Falcon split the ebon barrier to hyperspace — a bolt of lightning that made the pain from his torn ligaments, broken bones and singed flesh seem inconsequential. This time there will be no escape, Luke! boomed the malignant presence within him.

Skywalker writhed in agony. The whole galaxy seemed to resonate with Vader's outrage, piercing the youth's weary body to the soul. There is no sanctuary from me, continued the hated voice. None. . .except death. Stop them, Luke -- before it is too late.

*all quotes taken from "East Coker", from T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets, © 1943.

He could feel the Dark Lord's psychic stranglehold tighten as Solo's beleaguered freighter pulled away from the star destroyer, could feel it crushing the life from his body. As if in a dream he heard himself whimper out loud. The sound horrified him, forced out one last feeble flicker of resistance. Kill me, Father. . .doesn't matter. But I won't...won't join you...

He could not continue. The effort spent his last drop of inner strength. Numbly, Luke awaited the final blackness, the icy chill of death.

But it did not come. I will not kill you, came a voice weakened by the parsecs separating the two ships, but I will have you... Then, abruptly, Vader's suffocating presence was gone.

The Tatooinn's body slumped back in the seat like a limp doll. Free...free...Thank the Maker... But where will I find the strength to fight him off the next time? I have nothing left. Nothing.

He only gradually became aware of the woman kneeling at his side, touching his face tenderly, speaking to him. She was saying his name, asking him something. He felt that he should make an effort to understand her words and respond, but he didn't have the energy. He barely felt alive.

Abruptly, she stopped speaking and moved away. A second later, powerful hands were lifting him into the air. This time, Luke was unable to restrain a groan as the movement caused his fractured ribs to grate against each other. Pain didn't require energy to exist — it just required breath. He heard Chewbacca croon apologetically, then felt him shift his grip so that he was cradling Luke like a baby. The Wookiee's body was warm and soft, softer than the cot next to the autodoc, and he was almost sorry when Chewbacca put him down. He felt a slight pressure in his arm as Leia injected him with something — a sedative or a painkiller, he supposed. It seemed like a wasted effort; he had long since ceased being able to separate the pain from whatever else made up the essence of Luke Skywalker. Easing the pain would not restore him to what he had once been. Banishing the pain would not restore his faith.

"Luke?" Leia addressed him as she dabbed a healing salve on the abrasion on the side of his face. "Luke, can you hear me?"

He moaned softly, more to acknowledge her presence than to attempt a reply. He felt her slip her small hand into his, and with a concentrated effort, he forced his fingers to close around it.

"You're going to be all right," she said soothingly. "The nerve endings in your arm. . .they're still functional. Once we reach the flagship, we'll be able to replace your hand with a bionic prosthesis. There shouldn't be much difference in use or feeling. And there won't be any at all in appearance."

He didn't respond. It was strange. He hadn't really thought about his hand. Its loss seemed so trivial compared to the loss of everything he'd believed in. Lied to me. Deceived me. Used me. Why, Ben? Why? Was everything good in the universe tinged with evil? How could he possibly resist following his father down that dark path when he no longer had absolute faith in the light?

He choked back a sob and Leia's sweet face loomed overhead, calming him with her presence. "What is it?" she asked. "Luke?"

He shook his head weakly against the thin pillow. He didn't want her to know. He didn't want anyone to know. And yet he knew that eventually they would. He would have to tell them himself. . .before he left the Alliance.

But not yet. Not while the terror and the self-disgust were so strong within him, as suffocating as Vader's psychic onslaught had been. I will have you. . . The words echoed over and over again inside his head, and Luke shuddered uncontrollably, and there was no consolation in Leia's soft voice, no comfort in her concern. He felt himself losing his grasp on consciousness as the sedative took effect, but he knew that there was no peace in his dreams either. Vader was right — there was no sanctuary. None — except death. . .



Had they deceived us
Or deceived themselves, the quiet-voiced elders,
Bequeathing us merely a receipt for deceit?

How I despise denying him the answers that would banish his doubts and ease his self-torment. Must his way be so difficult?

For him is there no easy way. For him learning pain must be. His body will heal. His soul also, given enough time. But the part you have played in his nurturing is finished. Now is there nothing more to be done. Now continue he must along the path you have set him on — or not. His own responsibility that is. Not yours.

I understand that. And yet, when I hear him cry out to me, I cannot help feeling that it is *still* my responsibility to help him.

Do not deceive yourself. Your experience with Vader — taught you nothing, did it, of how limited our influence can be upon each nurturing soul?

Vader. . .was beyond my help. He could not see the danger of his decision, and felt no need to cry out for help. But Luke is well aware of his peril. He knows that he is alone on a dark path, lost, and he sees no light ahead to follow. His faith is gone.

No. Not gone. Only his faith in you — in me — in the outside. That is gone. Now must he learn to depend upon the inside. Only the inside. Or he will truly be lost. Not only to us, but to himself. Like your former pupil.

But the irony. . . His very fear of Vader may cause him to become like Vader. What is left for him, Master? What is left for him to encounter on the road that is more powerful than his fear? If he no longer trusts our lessons, who will teach him that Vader's power is only as strong as that fear?

If destined it is, he will teach himself. This knows he already within his soul. Only his mind refused to believe. If you treat him as if he were blind, then blind he will become. Forever will he need your guidance. Resist pity. Leave him alone. Touch upon the truth within himself, he must. . .by himself.

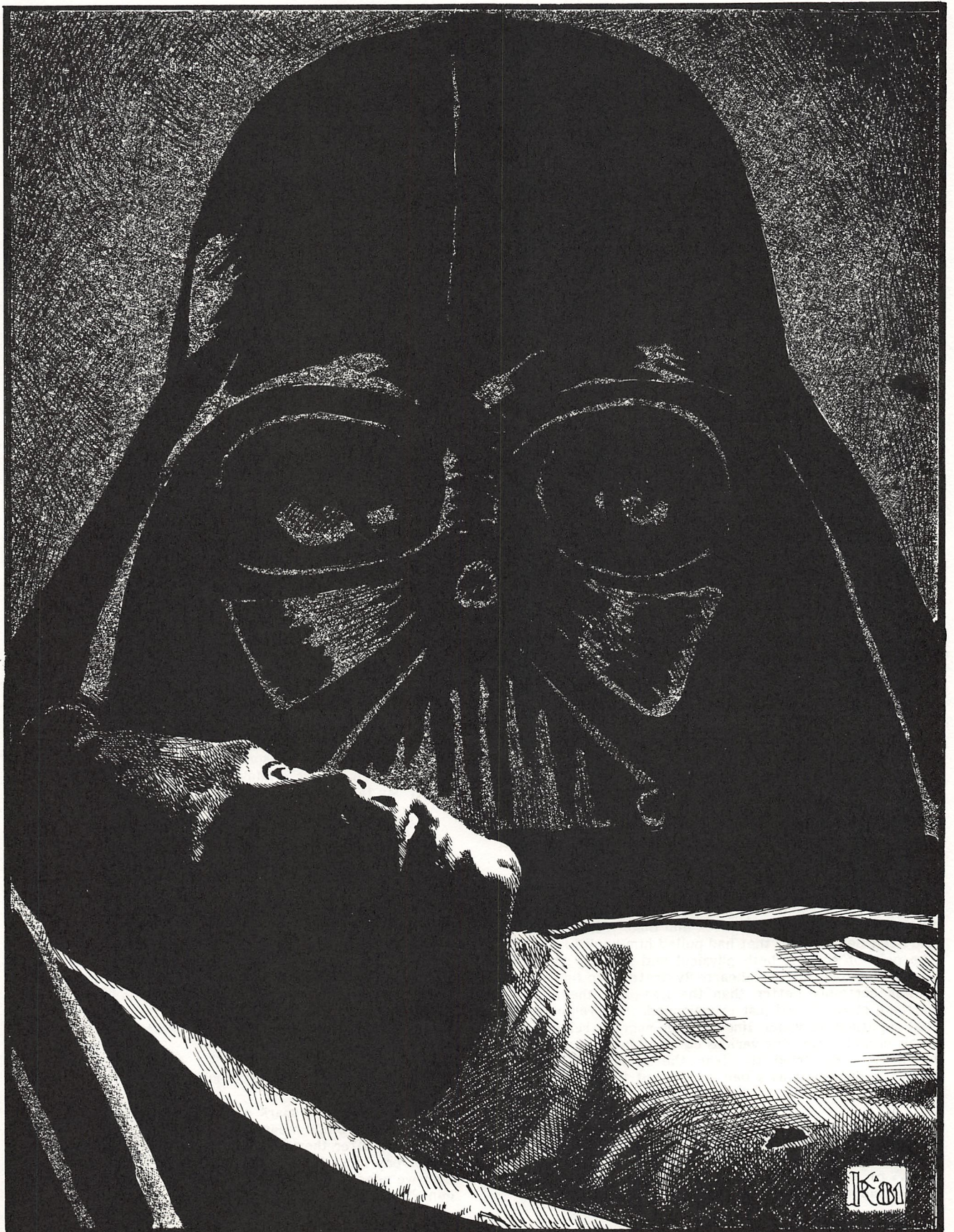
But what incentive does the boy have? What motivation does he have which will make him want to gain the truth?

The same that beckoned to him once before, when he left us. The flicker of one fragile life which is at once significant and insignificant in the shaping of destiny. The life itself — that is insignificant. But what that life means to the boy, what inspiration it creates within him—profoundly significant that is. That is what truly matters. Inspiration which consumes fear. Then are all things possible. Then is there truly hope — for Skywalker. . .and the galaxy.

The chill ascends from feet to knees,
The fever sings in mental wires.
If to be warmed, then I must freeze
And quake in frigid purgatorial fires.



Luke drifted beyond the confines of his mutilated body, without direction, he thought at first, then slowly came to realize that he was following a trail. Invisible, for he had no eyes to see. Unsounded, for he had no ears to hear. But a trail, a trail just as vivid as the one he'd followed across parsecs and parsecs of space to Bespin. A trail of feeling, for feeling he still had. A trail of anguish, of suffering. . .familiar feelings. It almost seemed as if he were following himself. . .a part of himself which had somehow been severed away along with his hand. He pushed himself forward, pursued the trail to this other self, enveloped it. . .

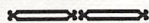


K&B

And suddenly, he had eyes — but they were sightless. . . ears which were stone deaf. . . a mouth which was dumb. A body which was paralyzed. . . and cold — excruciatingly cold in a way that had nothing to do with the sensations he'd experienced on Hoth. There cold had meant having a body of flesh and blood that was bombarded by snow and ice, buffeted by frigid winds. Here the winds came from within, his body itself was a block of ice. And he was cloaked in darkness, utter soul-wrenching darkness. It was as if the light of day had never existed, would never exist. He would never see the sun, he would never feel it beating down upon him. . .

Vulnerable. . . He'd been battered, beaten and betrayed in his lifetime, but he'd never felt so helpless, so emasculated. . . so dehumanized. . . There was no pain. It would have been more tolerable if there were. He would have known that he was still a living being.

But there was only the lack of pain. The lack of sound. The lack of light. The lack of any sensation but that endless, endless cold. . .



"NOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!"

The scream shattered the frozen hell Skywalker had fallen into like a thousand pieces of ice crystal, ripped him from the sterile womb and thrust him back into the world of physical sensation. It was a terrible sound, at once an expulsion of utter horror and an anguishingly futile attempt to establish existence on a tangible plane. He almost preferred the silence; he could feel the scream deep inside of him. It was cutting his heart to ribbons.

"Luke! Luke, what is it?"

Fingers like flame burned into his cold flesh, melting the icy shards that remained within his soul, and prodding Luke to full consciousness. The hideous sounds of the scream rose briefly. . . and then died in his throat as he realized that it was emanating from his own lungs.

"Luke, listen to me. You're safe. It's all right."

Safe? All right? Impossible. There was no such thing, no such state of being. The words offered no reassurance, but the voice, the presence of the speaker offered his only incentive to return to the world of the living. He forced himself to open his eyes, wincing as the overhead light stabbed at him. "Leia?"

"Here." She stepped into his line of sight, and the glare of light became a halo behind her. She moved her fingers briefly against his cheek and Luke realized that it had been Leia's touch that had pulled him back to reality. The pain of reality, both physical and mental, was such that he couldn't be wholeheartedly grateful to her — but it was certainly better than the non-pain, the non-everything of what he'd just experienced. The remnants of that nightmarish vision lingered on, nagging relentlessly at his mind the way the various cuts and bruises nagged at his body. He tried to clear the sequence from his thoughts, dismiss it as a bad dream, but the attempt was useless.

It wasn't a bad dream, he thought with increasing concern. It was as real as the vision I had of Han and Leia while I was on Dagobah. It was a glimpse of the past. . . or the future. . . or. . . now. . . yes -- now. . . but it wasn't happening to me. It was happening to. . . to. . .

"Han," he gasped out loud as at last the horrific realization began to seep into his conscious mind.

Leia's face registered shock at the outcry. "What?" she responded, her voice barely audible.

"Han!" he repeated more urgently, grabbing hold of the woman leaning over him with his free hand. "Where — where is he?" he demanded. "Where's Han?"

The expression in her eyes struck him like a blow, the emotional distress a resounding echo of the inner tumult within his own soul.

"Not dead," he whispered desperately. "He can't be dead."

"No," Leia responded in a lifeless tone that was anything but reassuring. "Not dead."

"I felt him. . . felt he was suffering." He saw her wince, but went on. "He was cold. So cold. Like he was,"

"In carbon freeze," she completed the sentence in a monotone.

"What?"

"Carbon freeze," she repeated, biting off the words tersely. "Vader. . . Vader had him put into suspended animation while we were on Bespin."

A hundred questions leapt into Luke's mind, competing with a deafening internal cry of outrage. Only one question made it to the tip of his tongue: "Why?"

"Vader said that. . . that was how he planned on delivering you to the Emperor. But he had to be certain that you'd survive the process."

The memory of the chamber where the duel on Bespin had commenced flashed into his head. Luke remembered now how choreographed the Dark Lord's early moves had seemed, how neatly he had maneuvered him toward that pit. "All too easy. . ." "So. . . he tested it out on Han first," he whispered, squeezing his eyes shut in anguish. "Oh, Maker. . . Maker. . ." Forgive me, Han. My fault. My fault you've gone through all this.

Leia pressed his hand tightly, as if she shared his thoughts. "Luke, listen to me. At least he's alive. He did survive the freezing process. If we can find him and reverse the process somehow—"

"Find him?" Luke echoed weakly, opening his eyes.

She nodded grimly. "Vader gave him to a bounty hunter. Chewie and I tried to stop him, but. . ." she paused, looking sick and angry with herself. "But we were too late. At first I thought that it would be impossible to trace them, but then I realized that this bounty hunter was probably working for the same person as the one who almost got Han on Ord Mantell."

Luke frowned slightly. "Jabba the Hut."

She nodded, a spark of hope appearing in her dark eyes. "Which would mean they were heading for Tatooine. We can go after them — find this Hut and deal with him. Either pay him off or. . . use less peaceful tactics. Whatever we need to do to wipe out that old debt of Han's. We can—"

"No," Skywalker cut her off abruptly. "You won't get him that way."

"What? Why not? Surely you're not suggesting that some petty back-water merchant would have the resources to prevent our taking Han by force—"

"In that quadrant, he has more resources than you might imagine. But that's not the problem. We won't be dealing with Jabba the Hut if we go to Tatooine. By the time we get there, Jabba won't even have Han."

"Won't have him? What are you talking about?"

("I will have you. . .")

Luke took a deep breath. "Vader," he said quietly. "I'm talking about Vader. By the time we get to Tatooine, that bounty hunter's cargo will have been confiscated by the Empire. By the time we get to Tatooine, Darth Vader will be waiting for us. For me."

The spark in Leia's eyes vanished and her expression once again became grim. "Yes," she said quietly, her voice coming from someplace far away. "Yes, perhaps you're right. I should have thought of that myself. The whole set-up on Bespin. . .that was for your benefit too." Slowly she turned her leaden gaze to Luke. "Why does he want you, Luke? Why is he willing to go to such great lengths to capture you?"

He turned his head away from her on the pillow silently. He wasn't ready to tell her. He wasn't ready to talk about it. He doubted that he ever would be. "I don't know," he said, his voice muffled. Even as he said it, he knew that the lie would be obvious to her. And yet he prayed all the same that she'd let the matter drop. If she didn't, if she pressed the matter. . .he would have to tell her. He cursed whatever quirk of the Force had made him fall in love with her so long ago. It didn't matter that the emotion was only capriciously reciprocated. He still was incapable of denying Leia anything that she truly wanted, from taking charge of a squadron of rebel pilots with ten times the battle experience he had, to answering a question as gut-wrenching as this one.

"Luke, there's so much at stake," she prodded urgently. "Every tiny bit of information is like a weapon to the rebellion, to be used for us. . .or against us. Against Han," she added with an emphasis that was like a knife in Luke's back.

He would have hated her for the attempt at emotional manipulation had he not been aware of the desperation which prompted it. He felt the cot give slightly beneath her weight and turned to see the apologetic look on her face as she leaned over him. Yet still the eyes were hard, demanding. "Luke, please."

All right. All right. She wants the truth. Once she has it, she'll leave me alone. Forever. Maybe that will be easier than the way it's been.

He took another deep breath and struggled to keep his voice level. "He's my. . .father. Vader. . .is my father. That's why he wants me. That's why he'll do anything. . .use anyone. . .to bring me to him."

He wasn't sure what kind of reaction he expected to evoke in Leia. Shock. Horror. Disgust. Certainly nothing resembling the cold, unstartled half-smile that crept across her lips. "You found this out. . .on Bespin," she

said flatly. "From Vader."

Luke wasn't certain that she expected to elicit a reply, but after a few seconds hesitation he said, "Yes."

She nodded, as if to herself. "And you believed it. You believed the words of a man who's known throughout the galaxy as a traitor, a man who'd say or do anything to obtain what he's after."

"Yes," Luke repeated, understanding abruptly the curiously cool expression on her face. She didn't believe it. She thought that he was incredibly naive to believe it. And how could he blame her — he had been incredibly naive the last time she'd seen him. "He wasn't lying, Leia."

"Of course he was," she responded acidly. "He's the Emperor's toady, isn't he? The Emperor has obviously heard of your powers, your connection with Obi-wan Kenobi, and he wants to turn those powers against the rebellion. What better way could Vader do that than to make you doubt your own heritage?" When Luke failed to comment, she set out on another tack. "By the Maker, Luke — Kenobi told you Vader murdered your father — isn't that what you told me? How can you being to trust that Sith's word over Obi-wan's?"

"It has nothing to do with trust," Luke replied in a low voice. For all his ignorance, there was no way he could commit his trust to a man who had cut off his hand, and then, seconds later, asked for the other one. But trust was not the matter at stake here.

"Then what in the universe could possibly make you believe Vader?"

"The Force," he said wearily. "Something I felt in the Force. . ." His voice trailed off as he re-explored the terrifying sensation he'd experienced on the gantry, seconds before he made the decision to jump. There had been nothing in Vader's words which convinced him of the Dark Lord's veracity. It was the aura surrounding him, reaching out to envelop Luke as well, permeating the youth's senses. Acrid, suffocating, like the stench of death. . .and yet at the same time bittersweet, like the smell of parched earth embracing a long-awaited rainfall which promised rebirth. . . (Rebirth! Son!)

It did not bear the tinge of deceit. And it followed in Luke's mind that what Vader had told him was equally truthful. Not that it lessened the anguish that truth held for Luke. If anything, it magnified it ten-fold, along with the fear he held in reserve for the next time he encountered the Sith.

"What you felt was his control over the Dark Side of the Force. Don't you realize that he was manipulating your impression? What you felt wasn't real. It was a distortion. . .a perversion of the truth. Vader's trying to use you. Damn it, stop shaking your head and listen to me!"

"You don't understand the Force, the way it works," he said. "You can't understand what I felt, or what I know, Leia."

For the first time, Leia's voice held definite anger. "No, I guess I can't. And if that's what you believe. . .then it might as well be true. Vader doesn't have to lure you to Tatooine. He's won you already."

She might as well have struck him. He ached to stop her as she walked stiffly towards the hatch, ached to tell her that it shouldn't matter what he believed, because he'd never walk willingly into Vader's clutches, never allow himself to become the Sith's tool against the Alliance. That was why he'd decided to leave the Alliance. That was why he'd planned to leave as soon as he recovered his strength. That was why he'd planned to run. Forever, if necessary.

Except that now there was one small hitch in those plans. One arrogant space jockey being played like a pawn. One Corellian Independent who wouldn't even be involved with the Alliance if it hadn't been for the man's untimely decision to pick up a couple of quick fares to Alderaan...

There was only one person who'd be able to thread his way through the treacherous maze of security that Vader was likely to set up around Solo on Tatooine. And that was only because Vader wanted that person to have access to the center of his trap. No one else would get near Han Solo.

And the fear would flow like venom in Skywalker's veins, destroying him before he even chanced to cross swords with the Dark Lord.

("I'm not afraid.")

"You will be. You will be.")

I will be. I am already. The exchange with Yoda haunted him, mocked him as much as Vader's promise that he would have him. I'm not a Jedi — I'm a coward. I have no faith in anyone, least of all myself. When I face Vader I'll be consumed by him, by the Dark Side. Maybe Leia's right. Maybe Vader's already won the battle. He planted the seeds of doubt...and all he has to do is reap his bitter harvest.

Why not? Hadn't it been naive of him to think that there would be someplace in the galaxy where he could hide from his fate? Why shouldn't his life end on Tatooine, the place he'd so desperately longed to escape from for most of his life? That place where he had heard about his father's heroism from an old man that he'd trusted with all his heart. Now the 'heroic' father waited there for the return of his prodigal child. Appropriate. So damnably appropriate...

He wallowed in the cesspool of self-pity for a long time before his thoughts finally drifted back to the cause of his dilemma, Solo himself. With a searing flash of guilt, it dawned on him that he'd been considering Solo's part in all this as an inanimate morsel of food, placed carefully between the jaws of a vicious trap, as an insidious means to the end of Luke Skywalker's existence as a free-willed human being. But what about Han Solo, the flesh and blood friend to Luke Skywalker, the best friend he'd ever had or was ever likely to have. The adventures that Han and he had shared had long since overshadowed the nostalgia he harbored for the boyish exploits of Biggs Darklighter and himself.

Why the hell am I going to Tatooine? he questioned himself fiercely. Because I feel...obligation? Because I'm bound by those two life debts I owe Han? Because I'm morally outraged that he's being used as the high stake in a game for my soul? Because I'd never get another good night's sleep?

No. The good reasons, the logical reasons, they were a mile long but they weren't what was going to draw him back to Tatooine. It was the more intangible set of reasons, the ones that he had to draw from deep within. Like the way he felt when he had said goodbye to Han on Hoth and he'd had the feeling that it was going to be the last time he'd see Solo for a long time, maybe forever, and yet there hadn't been any words to say how he felt — but the way Han had looked at him had said it just right. It had filled him with an unfamiliar glow of brotherly affection...of love, he'd finally admitted to himself. Thinking about it filled him once again, and the warmth trickled through Skywalker's veins, lapped persistently against the leather-gloved hand that seemed to be constricting his heart, loosened ever so slightly the grip of fear.

He thought again about the awful, awful nothingness that he had felt in Han's spirit, the overwhelming cold that was seeping into his friend's soul, devastating him in a way that physical torture never could. Solo's impotent fury filled him again, mingled with the warmth, stepped up his circulation — further pushed apart the heavy fingers of the hand of his enemy...of his father.

Father. He turned the word over in his mind several times. Father. Not...Master. Just because there is a blood tie there's no implication that he is linked to my soul, that he can claim possession of it. He's found the weak point in my emotional defenses...but my in my feelings for Han, I can find my strength. Vader may be my biological father, but Han is my brother, emotionally. Surely that means something on whatever cosmic scale balances this universe. What my feelings about Vader can rob me of when I come up against him again, my feelings for Han can replenish...

He was not certain, of course. He doubted that he would ever be certain of anything again. But the hypothesis made him feel better, less irrevocably doomed. And the more he thought about it, the more the idea of trying to rescue Han, even with the possibility of physical or metaphysical destruction, seemed preferable to living in some coward's hidey-hole for the rest of his days.

He felt himself drifting back to sleep, but this time he felt no apprehension. He knew that his dreams would still be dark...but suspected now there was yet a chance to rekindle the light. And he dreamt of a youth anxiously searching the Tatooine horizon at dawn, one sun risen and one sun just about to rise.



Home is where one starts from...
In my end is my beginning.

BITTER MEMORY

Vida Hull

A shrill scream ripped through Luke Skywalker's mind, wrenching him to consciousness. "Why?" he tried to ask, but found his throat as dry as the Tatooine sands. He closed his eyes. Calm. A Jedi is calm, murmured a rhythmic memory-voice. Saliva returned to his mouth and composure to his mind as the psychodroid expertly removed the hypnosensor and the straps which bound Luke to the examining table.

"Why?" he managed to whisper as he sat up, flexing the stiff muscles of his shoulders and arms. Some routine psychoscan this has turned out to be, he grumbled mentally before dutifully reminding himself that the Alliance was perfectly justified in ordering confidential scans for all highly-placed officers. An unresolved emotional conflict, a buried fear, or — worst of all — a subconscious mindplant by Imperial agents that could surface at a critical moment and turn a rebel into an unwilling traitor to his cause.

Therefore, as his wounds healed aboard the rebel Star Cruiser, Commander Skywalker was ordered to report for a routine psychiatric examination. One by one, the tensions and anxieties tormenting him had been brought forth, discussed, and analyzed. Not all were resolved; story-book solutions seldom apply to such conflicts of loyalty as confronted Luke: Vader's horrifying revelation, the temptation to use the Force for personal aims, the uncertainty of Han's fate, and even his vague jealousy of the Corellian's closeness with the princess. But Luke had recognized, acknowledged, and placed his problems in perspective. He could deal with the known.

Then came the psychoscan, the procedure devised to reveal any hidden conflict — trauma, guilt, or doubt unacknowledged by the conscious mind. Luke lay strapped

to the table to prevent injury from involuntary movement under hypnosis, while the psychodroid connected the equipment which would initiate the scan and transmit the energy of Luke's thought processes to the droid's own storage system. Under hypnosis, Luke relaxed, all inhibitions and conscious restraints in abeyance as he relived the events of the last few months.

The deadly boredom of bonechilling drill on Hoth. The struggle to keep the fighters and snowspeeders operable in subzero temperatures. Wearying patrols in a wasteland of nothingness. The sharp horror of waking in a wampa's larder. Icy cold. Numbness. Delirium -- Ben, Han... No, not delusions. The battle for Hoth. Fear as cold as the climate. Resolve as hot as blaster fire. Elation as the transports escaped. Adrenalin surging. Life bright and brittle. Sudden, remorseless death. Cacophony: voices shouting, engines whining, explosions. Wrong somehow. Death should be still.

Luke's scream shattered the pristine stillness of sickbay, and emotional indicators on the machines flared red. Programmed to ferret out the source of a patient's disturbance, the droid repeated the psychoscan again and again, bringing the critical moment to focus. With the traumatic event revealed, the patient's conscious attention was needed to examine and analyze its significance. The droid switched off the scanner and released the patient.

"But why?" Luke repeated. "Why would that incident cause such an extreme reaction? I didn't scream at the time. I acted."

The droid hummed reassuringly. "Sometimes, Commander Skywalker, the emotional reaction is buried,



Yida Hull ©1982

only to resurface later. Do you believe the incident to be insignificant?"

Who programmed psychodroids to answer questions with a question? "No, it was pretty intense. Imperial walkers bearing down on us. Friends, comrades, blown to bits along with their ships. My gunner, Dack, was killed right there behind me. And then that giant metal paw made a footprint out of my snowspeeder."

"And that is the precise moment of your psychic replay — the moment when the walker crushes your fighter, when you react so emotionally. Why is that?"

"If I knew, I wouldn't still be here," mumbled Luke.

"Would you like to replay that section of memory? Perhaps an objective screening this time, rather than hypnotic recall."

"Sure, why not? I've already been through it five times." Not even Vader's disclosure had formed this kind of blockage. How could he forget that sinister voice claiming, "I am your father." But Luke knew what that conflict was, despite his inability to resolve it. The significance of the battlefield incident eluded him.

The little screen on the droid's chest lit up. Across it moved visual reproductions of Luke's own memories, unblurred by time or conscious analysis. Scorching flashes of blaster fire left no mark against impenetrable armor; the raking beams from the walkers' guns melted trenches in the frozen landscape. Why don't they fall in the slush and steam? Luke wondered, watching the weight of the mammoth machines compress the surface to ice. An explosion! Even at the time he had heard it through his helmet. Swerving the little snowspeeder between giant legs, his elation died. One of ours, not theirs. He had to stop them. His responsibility. Too bad he couldn't handle them like that bully in school on Tatooine. Just stick out a skinny leg and trip the big...

"Harpoons!" he called. "Use your harpoons and tow cables. Go for the legs. It's our only hope of stopping them." Had he really said that: "only hope"? No way to hearten men, men who were about to die.

And then, behind him, Dack called to him to wait, to slow up. Something was wrong. Luke told him to hang on. 'Hang on to life, Dack, with all you've got because your 'ace' pilot and Rogue Leader is going to fly you right into an Imperial beam. But Luke turned in time; they'd only caught the dissipating heat of the blast, not the beam. Not enough to destroy the whole ship; just enough to blow up your panel and knock the life out of you, Dack.

Luke signalled to the droid, who froze the picture. "Is that it? I feel guilty because Dack died and I lived? Because I was the pilot and didn't maneuver fast enough for him?"

"What do you think?"

"Doesn't make sense. Blaster fire was all around. No pilot could watch for every beam. We just kept moving and kept praying. I destroyed a walker. We bought time enough to save the transports. Of course, I wish it hadn't happened. I'm angry about Dack and the others dying, but I know it wasn't my fault. And the unreasoning guilt you were talking about three replays ago — that wouldn't be strong enough for me to scream under hypnosis, would it?"

"Doubtful. Also, your vocalization occurred at a later point."

"Okay. Let's go on," said Luke. The image on the metallic chest moved again. Luke watched impassively until the damaged fighter crashed into a snowbank, directly in the path of the remaining walker. His emotional detachment was shot. Jedi or not, his stomach was in knots and perspiration beaded his forehead. He saw himself twisting in his seat, scrambling into Dack's section pressing his fingers to his friend's neck to feel for a pulse, calling to him. Then, out of necessity, he abandoned the effort and reached across the body for an explosive device and the cable harpoon. He jumped free as the walker's giant foot, looming overhead, fell to crush the speeder...and Dack.

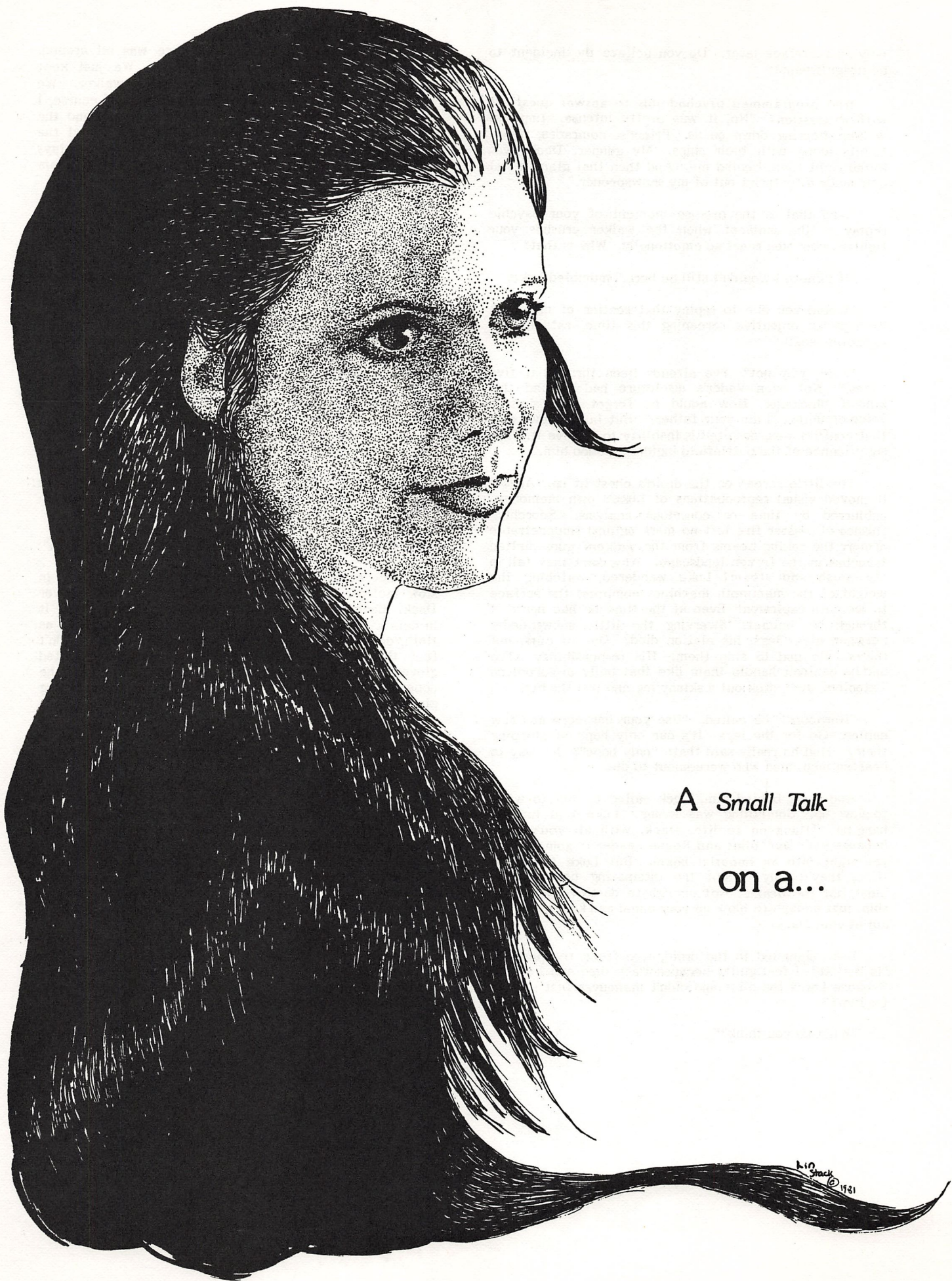
The scream rose unbidden in Luke's throat. He clamped his teeth together as his throat spasmed. He would not cry aloud!

"That part again — slowly. It's in there somewhere."

Once again his speeder tunneled into the snow. In slow motion, Luke turned in his seat and leaned over Dack. Each action was drawn out so he could examine it in detail. His fingers touched the artery — cold, cold as Hoth, cold as death. No, that wasn't right. He couldn't feel the exterior temperature through his insulated gloves. His gloves! He hadn't thought. How could he hope to feel the throb of lifeblood when he was wearing gloves!

The memory scan plodded on. Through a haze of rising emotion, Luke saw himself reach for the harpoon. As he lifted the cylinder past Dack's face, under his nostrils, its metallic surface fogged. It could have gone unnoticed, but it didn't. Then the shadow of the walker dimmed the surroundings, and something, — survival reflex? realization that there was nothing he could do? — pushed that perception away from his conscious mind, down through layers of blackness, to hide, to lurk until it could resurface. He had killed a friend — or let him die. And Luke feared, Luke knew that the Alliance would call on him to sacrifice a friend or an innocent.

The walker ground the speeder into the slush; and beneath that colossal foot, the ice was stained with crimson streaks. Luke did not scream. He buried his face in his hands and wept; and the psychodroid certified him fit for service again.



A Small Talk

on a...

L. J. Shack
© 1981

...LARGE SUBJECT

Marcia Brin

Boy, Cousin Marla...

...it's really good to see you, by the way.
I can't believe you survived...

Where was I?

Oh, yes,

It's certainly a lot harder to get up these days.

After all, I'm a relatively small person—

—beg your pardon?

Short?

Watch it.

Only the Corellian gets away with that.

Anyway,

I have been getting

bigger

in certain areas,

these last nine months!

Twins.

Do you believe that?

Actually,

we hadn't planned it this way.

You know,

a rebellion isn't the best place to bring up children.

Unfortunately,

that bad batch of contraceptives

had other ideas.

Half the women ended up pregnant!

Great way to run a rebellion.

Most of us married ladies decided to—

um, 'carry on',

as it were.

I'll never forget Han's face!

I'd fainted.

Damn stupid thing to to!

Never done that before.

But then,

who knew?

Solo had a coronary on the spot;

grabbed me,

and dashed for the medcenter.

Record time, too!

Doctor told me first.

Then,

together,

and very carefully,

we broke the news to the tough guy.

I wish I'd had a holocam.

There was an expression for posterity!

As soon as we're back in our quarters,
he starts worrying:

I shouldn't be carrying that.

That, by the way,

was a file.

All of five ounces.

I shouldn't work so hard.

I should eat right.

I told him

I had only one worry.

How to raise two fatherless children.

"Fatherless?"

he asked.

"You bet!"

I answered.

Because if he kept this up for another seven months,

I was going to kill him.

He just blinked a couple of times,

and said,

"Oh."

Well,

it helped.

A little.

He still worries.

He just doesn't do it in front of me.

He's really adorable.

Did I mention that?

Several times?

Sorry.

Men,

though,

really have this bad habit of falling apart on you

at all the wrong times.

Take Mr. Nerves of Steel.

Spent his life living on the knife edge.

Right?

Right.

Laughs at danger.

Right?

Right.

Thumbs his nose at the Empire.

Right?

Right.

And if our offspring aren't born soon

he'll be a basket case.

Right?

Right.

Well,

he's really been a great husband.

I'm sure he'll be a great father.

And he's really ador—

oops,

sorry.

The Ballad of Taenni and Shanni Jani Hicks

(to "The Leaves They Do Grow Green")

A TALE OF THE CONTRAVERSE
from the Journals of Sharna Kenobi Skywalker

The winds here blow high and two suns light the sky
Many's the time I bid my love goodbye;
Many's the hour I've sat here all alone.
The story is yours for the knowing....

Papa, oh Papa, you've done me great wrong:
Give me a husband, and then to war he's gone;
One month of two his face I never see,
Though daily my love is still growing....

Daughter, oh Daughter, why can't you see the light?
I've married you to a gentle Jedi knight.
He'll make a husband when this war is done;
His love for you daily is showing....

Papa, dear Papa, if you can see a way,
Leave him with me for one year and a day;
A year to be happy, a year to be with him,
And then I won't cry when he's going....

One day a message from Papa to me came.
All that I saw was a notice and a name.
Now I'm alone, and he will never know
His baby inside me is growing....

Just twenty-three, he was a married man;
Just twenty-five, the father of a son.
Now on some world his body lies in rest
For now death has ended his growing....

The True & Worthy

Charla Menke

Spock was waiting for the captain as he stepped down into the well of the bridge. "Good morning, Mr. Spock. It was a quiet night, I assume?"

He was answered by the Vulcan's nod and a handful of crisp computer printouts. "You asked to see the evaluations of the new personnel as soon as they were completed."

Captain James T. Kirk rippled through the sheets with an occasional comment or question. One name in particular caught his eye, and he smiled with an obvious pleasure for which Spock could see no stimulus.

Kirk hoped that he did not appear as smug and self-satisfied as he felt as he thought of the lovely woman who now shared the early hours of the morning before his daily routine officially began.

He had first met the lieutenant on Starbase and immediately been attracted to her. In the week there, they had become first friends, then lovers. Still it had been quite a shock when he had learned that she had been assigned to the Enterprise.

Kirk quickly turned his thoughts back to business, and frowned. Ordinarily, the pending question of Thormalian membership in the United Federation of Planets would have meant nothing to Jim Kirk, but for reasons still unexplained, Starfleet had cancelled all shoreleave and ordered the Enterprise immediately out to patrol the Federation sector of space that bordered the Thormalian Alliance.

Patrol assignments were usually monotonous rou-

tines, fraught with boredom. And even though they were on yellow alert status, this mission was no different. No, Kirk realized, there was one difference, a personal difference, and as the weeks had mounted, his sense of annoyance had grown. He remembered the regretful look on Sara's face as he had left that morning. Ever since Sara had first charmed him into active pursuit of her affections, he had spent almost all of his free time in her company. He smiled, again, something between gloating and chagrin, and realized that his professional scruples would not bear close scrutiny.

30

"Jim, explain to me one more time why this mission is so important. It still makes no sense to me," Sara asked Kirk as they sat in his office one evening, finishing the daily status report for Starfleet.

He smiled. "We're here in case the Klingons or the Romulans or the Orions — or who knows who else — should decide to move in on the Thormalian treset trade while negotiations are underway to admit Thormalia to the Federation. That's simple enough."

Sara perched on his desk and played with the manifest tapes resting on it. "Treset, treset — who cares? I'm sick and tired of waiting around for something to happen."

He smiled at her frustration. "Well, let's hope nothing does happen because it's bound to be trouble. Thormalia is the main source of treset. It may be ugly, unappealing stuff to mine and ship, but without its filtering properties, the life support systems of deep

space vessels couldn't function."

"Then why don't the Vulcans and their cronies just give up gracefully and stop arguing against the Thormalian membership? I can't see where they're accomplishing anything constructive. Why don't they want Thormalia to join the Federation anyway?"

Kirk ducked his head and smiled at the idea of his implacable Vulcan first officer, Spock, being told to 'give up'. "Well, Sara, from what little I know of the situation, there are several things against an easy settlement with the Vulcan delegates. For one thing, the Vulcans do not trust Thormalia as any ally."

Her eyebrows rose at this. "Why not?"

Kirk shrugged. "The Thormalians were once loosely allied with the Romulan Empire in a war which eventually involved certain Vulcan research outposts. Those outposts were annihilated. The Vulcans have remained distrustful of them ever since."

Sara's eyes narrowed as though she were attempting to read a history lesson from a text too far from her eyes. "But, Jim, if I remember correctly, that all happened back before the Vulcan thousand-year peace!" she said in disbelief. "You don't mean that Vulcan still holds that against them, after all this time?"

"Vulcans have long memories, Sara. It comes from the fact that their life spans are so long, I guess. Spock could explain it better than I. You should ask him."

She laughed and shook her head. "No thanks. I'd rather be your pupil any day. I don't think your first officer likes me very much."

Kirk smiled. "You just don't know Spock very well yet, Sara. But no Vulcan ever 'gives up' without a struggle. And so far they've accomplished their purpose. The Federation Council is so evenly divided on the matter that I'm beginning to believe it may never be resolved." Then, as the young lieutenant rose from the desk and shook her black hair, he added, "But if we're finished here, why don't we go find something else to do?"

A

Kirk settled one hip on the desk in Sickbay one morning and grinned at McCoy as the medic snapped off the viewscreen. "Well, Bones, what's the verdict?"

McCoy snorted. "Like most of the crew, Captain, you're over-tired. Now that the Potemkin's on the way to relieve us, I recommend that once we reach Starbase, you take the same rest leave you're ordering for the rest of the crew."

Kirk nodded. "I have to say I'm relieved to hear there's nothing wrong. I may have some special plans for that leave time."

McCoy smiled indulgently. "Oh? Anything to do with a certain Lieutenant Carstairs, Captain?" Over the past few months it had become increasingly obvious to the doctor that Kirk's interest in the shapely officer was becoming more than professional.

The hazel eyes twinkled with a secret. "I just may request enough time for a honeymoon, Bones."

McCoy had been expecting it. His blue eyes snapped with delight. "Congratulations, Jim!" He thrust out a warm hand and grasped Kirk's with affection. "She'll make a lovely wife for a starship captain."

Kirk ducked his head sheepishly. "Keep it quiet, will you, Bones. We haven't announced it yet."

McCoy's face showed his surprise.

"There's been so much tension lately with this uproar in the Federation over the Thormalian affair. We've been on patrol so long there just hasn't been — well — the right moment for much romance. I thought once the Enterprise docks. . ."

McCoy was smiling again. "Of course! Soft lights, sweet music, the scent of flowers in the air. I understand, Jim. I think it's wonderful! It's time you settled down and founded your own dynasty for the Admiralty."

Kirk shook his head with amusement, but his delight was not concealed. "Bones, when the times comes, Sara will need someone to give her away. . ."

"I'd be honored, Jim." The doctor's affection for his old friend carried through the warm tones of his voice.

"Thanks, Bones. I'd like Spock to stand up with me."

McCoy's look became skeptical. "Have you asked him yet?"

The intercom interrupted. "Bridge to Captain!"

"Kirk here."

Uhura's voice was crisp with her usual efficiency. "Captain, Mr. Spock has just been given leave to return to Vulcan. I wanted to let him know, but I can't locate him."

Kirk's brows knitted together. The twinkle was gone from his eyes. He was back to business. "What leave, Lieutenant? I wasn't aware Mr. Spock had requested one."

"The leave request came directly from T'Pol and the Vulcan Council, Captain. I don't believe Mr. Spock expected it — although he did receive a private signal earlier; he took it in his cabin. Shall I try his quarters again, sir? They said it's a family emergency. . ."

"No, Lieutenant, that's all right. I'll take care of it. Kirk out." He turned to McCoy with anxiety in his eyes.

"Family emergency?" McCoy's own expression grew concerned. "You don't suppose Sarek has had another heart spell, do you? I know the Vulcan representatives have been against Thormalian membership in the Federation Council. I heard things got pretty strained."

"Still are, from what little I know about it, Bones. There were rumors that the Vulcans were ready to walk out. I hope that's not it."

"Wouldn't Spock have told you if there was something seriously wrong at home? Maybe his mother. . ."

Kirk shook his head with a rueful smile. "I don't know, Bones. We haven't seen each other very much off duty for the past few weeks. He doesn't tend to hang around when Sara and I are together." He squared his shoulders. "I'd better see him right away."



McCoy laid a restraining hand on Kirk's shoulder. "Easy, Jim! If T'Pol wants him sent home immediately, I don't think there will be much you can do about it."

Kirk looked startled. "Naturally I want him to go home, Bones! I just thought perhaps he could stay for the ceremony if we set the date right away."

The doctor was shaking his head. "By your own admission, you haven't spent much time with Spock lately. You may not have noticed it, Jim, but he's been laced tight into his Vulcan suit. Probably all this Thormalian business, but now, if there's been bad news from home besides. . ."

Kirk was staring straight at McCoy, but his conscience was speaking. "You think being my best man will delay him from going home?"

McCoy shrugged. "He doesn't think like we do, Jim. What's important to us isn't always important to him." The doctor's face was solemn. "I sometimes wonder what would happen if he were ever to be forced into a choice between his loyalty to Vulcan and his loyalty to you." He watched Kirk turn the thought over in his mind. "He's still his Vulcan father's son, Jim. Keep that in mind, if you're going to ask him to choose now."

Kirk depressed the intercom button, his decision already made. "This is the Captain. Mr. Spock, report to my quarters immediately! Kirk out." He faced the doctor over the desk. "I'm only going to deliver a message to him, Bones, and let him know I'll be there if there's anything I can do. Sara and I have waited this long. . .we can wait until Spock gets back."

He was just entering his cabin as the intercom whistled. He had to sprint to his desk to catch the signal. "Kirk here."

"Marshall on the hangar deck, sir. I heard your call for Mr. Spock and I thought you should know he left for Starbase in a shuttle over twenty minutes ago. He said something about a Vulcan ship waiting for him there."

"Thank you, Marshall. Kirk out."

Twenty minutes earlier? Uhura said the leave approval had just arrived. Spock, absent without leave, even for twenty minutes, was unthinkable! Something had to be very wrong. He hit the intercom button. "Kirk here. Uhura, get our shuttle on the horn. Patch it through to my cabin, please."

Damn! He sat heavily in the molded styrene chair and closed his eyes in weariness. Why was there never any end to the problems? They had worked long enough, hard enough to have earned a little time for happiness. Happiness was supposed to be shared with those closest to you. Now, when he wanted his Vulcan friend most, why did Spock leave without a word? Why did it bother him so much? A captain had a right to something outside his ship, didn't he? After all, Spock didn't share everything with him either. Still, if he were facing some personal crisis, why hadn't Spock come to him? Probably didn't think it was 'logical' to spoil his happiness with Sara. Spock would have noticed how happy she made him; how she pleased and soothed him. No, Spock wouldn't have wanted to spoil that.

Kirk opened his eyes to check his chronometer and wondered why he had not noticed the piece of paper before. It was tucked beneath his paperweight; a sheet of Enterprise stationery. He knew who it was from before he saw the familiar writing.

Jim —

I regret that I cannot elaborate at this time upon the emergency which draws me home. It is nothing with which you need be concerned. Regrettably, this may require extended leave. Until we meet again.

Live Long and Prosper,
Spock

Uhura was on the intercom again. "Captain, I have been hailing the shuttlecraft, but she refuses to answer. Shall I continue?"

"Never mind, Lieutenant. Thanks for the try. Kirk out." Of course Spock wasn't answering! He had no intention of explaining anything to anyone and especially not to him. That enigmatic note made that clear enough. He need not be concerned. Well, he was concerned! He was damned concerned!

"Shuttlebay, this is Kirk! Prepare a shuttle for launch. I'll be right there!" Thank heavens Scotty had the conn. Maybe he would have time enough to catch up with Spock before he boarded that other ship for home. He had a lot of questions to ask him about this peculiar 'emergency'.

Kirk was well on his way down the corridor, heading for the shuttlebay when he heard a musical voice calling after him. He stopped and turned, waiting for Sara to catch up with him in the empty corridor. He smiled as she leaned toward him and decorated his mouth with a lingering kiss. "I went to meet you in Sickbay and Leonard said you'd gone back to your cabin. Then you weren't there either and I had to ask half a dozen crewmen where you'd gone. What's going on?"

There were other crewmen approaching them now. It was change of watch. They would not be alone again for some time. He began walking again, with her beside him. It was difficult for him to keep his eyes off the tight-fitting blue skirt that moved smoothly over her hips as she matched his strides. "Something wrong, Jim? What is it?"

"Spock. I don't have time to explain in detail, Sara. He's on his way to Starbase and I have to catch up to him. There's been some sort of misunderstanding and I have to clear it up." They had reached the shuttlebay. "I'm sorry," he ran his fingers over her cheek, "but I'll probably be back late."

Her brown eyes smiled up at him with the misty look he dreamed about in the hours he spent away from her. He caught a whiff of her perfume as she patted his hand. "It's all right, Jim. I've gotten used to waiting." She searched his face. "You're worried about him, aren't you?"

"Yes." He saw the hangar crew leaving the area, getting his launch ready. Kirk was aware of the time he was wasting. He took her shoulders in his hands. "I have to go, Sara, or I'll never catch him." They had walked out of sight behind the shuttlecraft and he pulled her close

and kissed her. He had intended for the kiss to be a promise of his return and it startled him when she suddenly pulled away.

Then he saw the reason why. Midshipman Ellers from Engineering was behind them, still working on the craft. Kirk stood straight and nodded his recognition. "I'm ready to go, Ellers," he said curtly.

"Aye, sir." To Kirk's astonishment a phaser appeared in the engineer's hand, aimed right at Sara. "So am I, Captain Kirk. Now don't do anything sudden, or I'll have to kill her."

Kirk cursed silently. The hangar crew was gone, awaiting his launch. There was no one to witness this strange turn of events. His hazel eyes watched angrily as he saw Sara go rigid with fear.

Ellers had a hold on her arm now and was pulling her toward the shuttlecraft entrance, his phaser still aimed at her ribs. "Come along now, Captain. I have no desire to reach Starbase with the Enterprise. Let's go!" He jerked Sara's arm, hard this time, and she drew her breath in sharply.

"Ellers. . ." Kirk growled.

"Jim, don't!" Her eyes pleaded with him not to try anything. The pair moved up the ramp into the shuttlecraft with Kirk close behind.

"The hatch, please, Captain," Ellers ordered with a cold glint in his brown eyes as he shoved Sara into the first seat.

"Ellers," Kirk said with remarkable control while his blood thundered in his ears, "you're already in trouble. Give it up and we'll get help for you. You can't get away with hijacking a Starfleet shuttle and two officers! Give it up!" He hit the switch that controlled the hatch.

"No, Captain, I don't think so," Ellers answered calmly.

"Jim!" Kirk heard Sara cry out and tensed for action. Ellers' stunning blast enveloped his body. The horrified look in Sara's eyes was the last thing he saw.



The ambassadorial ship was passing the last of Vulcan Space Central's marker buoys as Spock carefully finished dressing in the clothing that his father's staff had thoughtfully provided. It seemed odd to wear the Vulcan thris again. Its loose folds hung from his shoulders, giving his body an unaccustomed sense of freedom after the second skin of his Fleet uniform. He smoothed the wrinkles from his now wrapped uniform and the false sleeves of his new garment swung with the motion. The Starfleet ensignia glinted up at him as he placed it on the berth beside the other possessions which whispered of the life he had so suddenly abandoned. He had no idea when he would be free to take up that life again.

Remembrance nudged him with the thought of the fine starship left behind. His final glimpse of her smooth milky-white hull amid the starfield had been disquieting. There were other, more distressing things which, even now, he did not choose to contemplate. Starfleet was far behind him. Ahead was the home he had not seen in three years.

He sensed the ship settle itself in orbit. He left his cabin and headed straight for the transport chamber. He felt the eyes of his father's people on him. He knew that they had been impressed by his decorum. No doubt they had heard of him by rumor, as well as by report, and had been uncertain of what to expect from their Ambassador's self-exiled son. He had conducted himself with perfect etiquette; had made no inquiries of them. They, in turn, had been gratified to see his solemn demeanor and had volunteered the information he wished to know. His mother was away, visiting relatives on an Earth colony. His father, Sarek, had been injured in an assault suffered on their planet shortly after his return from the latest disagreeable Federation Council meeting. T'Pau, the matriarch of their illustrious family, had personally requested Spock's presence at home.

Spock kept his own counsel after these disclosures. He had already received details from T'Pau herself in a personal message while still aboard the Enterprise. The politically devastating fact was that one of the most sacred Vulcan relics had been stolen. The ramifications of the theft were yet to be felt. Spock carried this knowledge and prepared himself for the discipline of Vulcan as he materialized on his planet's surface.

Upon materializing, the first person he saw was his father, Sarek, his left arm in a sling. He was pale and bruised, but appeared on the whole not too badly used. He raised his right hand in greeting and spoke in the Vulcan tongue, "Peace and long life to you, Spock. Your homeland welcomes you."

Spock returned the gesture, aware of the long sleeves slapping his legs as he moved forward in the dry heat. "Live long and prosper, Sarek. I am gratified to see you are not seriously injured." His native language returned easily to him. It was vaguely satisfying to use it once again.

Their dark brown eyes locked. Sarek's gaze dropped as he waved his free hand toward a waiting air car. "Do not trouble over it. It has been just disabling enough to make it necessary for us to summon you."

They stepped into the vehicle and Sarek touched the guidance controls with practiced ease. The noiseless motion would not hinder their conversation. The greying Vulcan cast a long look at his son. No muscle moved in Spock's face as the buildings of his home city of ShiKahr blurred past them as they headed directly for the shrine.

"Are you prepared to assume the ancient duty I cannot, Spock?"

"I am here, as requested."

Sarek was satisfied. "T'Pau awaits you at the shrine. You must keep vigil there before you take up your quest."

Spock nodded. "You are certain it was Sefik who attacked you?"

It was Sarek's turn to nod. "Yes, quite certain. I saw his face clearly while his henchmen beat me. I believe he is quite insane."

"Unfortunate. My cousin was always most agile in his mind. It is a loss."

"It is an unspeakable shame, to have one of our own

blood perpetrate such a blasphemous crime." Sarek's eyes glittered unpleasantly. "He seeks vengeance, Spock. On me, for not preferring and advancing him beyond his just desserts and — most of all, my son — on you, for being greater than he is. He covets your place in Starfleet, Spock."

"He always did. He never understood why T'Pau chose to sponsor my entrance to the Academy instead of his."

"Neither did I, for many years."

Spock raised one eyebrow. He had not expected such a revelation from his sire. He began to suspect his father was more seriously hurt than he pretended.

The aircar slowed and stopped. They disembarked at the colonnaded entrance to the shrine. They entered in silence and Spock felt the hot winds of the desert beyond slap against his body. There was no sound except the breathless murmur of the constant wind and the distant, musical sound of the temple chimes. The ancient stones beneath their feet were covered with the fine blown sand that never left them, only changed its patterns in a constant carpet of dust swirls and eddies. The peace of ages echoed in this place. It had been held in reverence for untold centuries and had been within their family's protection for the last recorded historical cycle.

At the end of the colonnade they halted. The area before them was a courtyard formed by ancient monoliths covered with Vulcan runes. Straight ahead of them stood the low shrine building. A simple construction from the same timeless rocks, it had been built to house the sacred IDIC of Surak, centuries before. The ancient relic was the most revered and potent Vulcan symbol. It had been stolen, and the Vulcan system it had fostered trembled at its foundation. The amassed dignity that was Vulcan wavered as the order of the Vulcan world was threatened. It was T'Pau's responsibility, as head of the Vulcan Council, to restore the medallion and set things to rights.

Spock knew the ritual. He stepped to the ceremonial gong at the end of the colonnade and struck it. Its deep tones reverberated in the whispering wind. The two males waited in silence.

Then they saw her, frail and ancient in her black robes, walking slowly out of the shrine's darkness into the searing heat of Vulcan day. She used a long, carved staff to support and steady herself as she took her place on the steps of the shrine. Even yards away from the courtyard, Spock could feel the burning intensity of her gaze come to rest on him. She raised her hand in the sign of greeting. Her speech held the accent and archaic forms. "Peace and long life to thee, Spockk. Thee has been long away from us."

Spock raised his hand and spoke the ritual reply. "Live long and prosper, T'Pau. My thoughts have never been far from thee."

She nodded. Her voice was dry as the wind. "Our thoughts have followed thee also, Spockk. Approach us."

The men advanced to the steps and she waved Sarek to one side. "Sit, Sarek. Thy wound is deep." Then her eyes fell back on Spock and took him in. "Thee grows in strength and purpose, Spockk. Thee knows why thee is here?"

"I am to punish the defiler of this place."

"Thee shall be sent forth, as the eldest of thy line fit for combat, to bring thy traitorous cousin, Sefik, to justice for the shame he has brought upon thy family's name. He has stolen the sacred relic, Spockk! He has done the unthinkable!" She trembled in her outrage.

"May I question, T'Pau?"

"Thee may."

His voice fell back into its regular speech pattern. "How was this accomplished? I understood the shrine was protected by extensive security measures. How is it that they failed, allowing my father to be attacked during meditation?"

Her heavy brows arched upward and her eyes reached into his to examine what he knew. "We are not certain, Spockk. In hope of further enlightenment, the elders still interrogate the Andorian mercenary thy father struck down."

Spock chanced a look at his father sitting on the step nearby. He had not heard that Sarek had captured one of his attackers. He felt a certain pride in his father's skill as a warrior. Sarek had not lost it all as a diplomat.

T'Pau watched Spock closely. She had always favored him because he had overcome so much to earn his Vulcan heritage. He had worked harder, longer than the other Vulcan youths, with a dedication and simple sincerity that overcame his human characteristics. "Thee has been long among thy human comrades, Spockk. Is thee prepared to accept thy task?"

"I am."

She thrust out her hand and he knew what she sought. He reached into the folds of his thris and produced it; a shining IDIC on its chain. It had been given to him by his father after his Kahs-wan manhood rites.

At her gesture, Spock knelt on the step and waited with bowed head as T'Pau tapped the ancient stonework with her staff. Instantly an attendant appeared with brazier on a tripod stand. The sacred flame from the shrine burned with a heat that seemed more fierce than the Vulcan sun.

T'Pau thrust out her hand once more and Spock laid his pendant in it. The elderly matriarch passed the medallion through the brazier's flame and spoke the accented syllables of Old Vulcan. "As this ancient symbol of thy race is used, Spockk, so shall thee pass through the flames of trial. Thee must be strong in discipline and firm in purpose, for if thee fails this task thy life is forfeit. Spockk, thee swears to do this thing?" She could not see his face, only the crown of black hair.

"I swear."

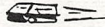
"Arise, Spockk!" She watched him stand before her once again, then placed the chain around his neck. It was still warm from the flame. "Go into the shrine, Spockk. Take strength from thy ancestors this day. Tonight thy vigil ends and thy task begins!"

Spock folded his hands before his face in worship. "I am thy servant, T'Pau."



She turned aside to allow him to climb the steps remaining to the entrance of the darkened shrine. So many others had kept vigil there through all the years which she remembered. Their bones were long since dust like the sparkling sand which moved before her eyes in the courtyard. Her gaze fell on Sarek standing by. "He does thee credit, Sarek. What he does now, will be done well."

The Ambassador held himself straight, met her eyes, and nodded.



Kirk found himself tied to a seat when he came to consciousness. The shuttlecraft was already underway. His first thought was for Sara. She was seated beside him, bound. "Sara, are you all right? Did he hurt you?" His mouth was dry.

Her eyes glowed; her voice was calm. "No, Jim, I'm all right. I tried to fight, but I was no match for him, I'm afraid."

Kirk glowered at the burly shoulders in the pilot's seat. "No, you're not. How long have I been out?"

Ellers answered from the flight console. "Long enough, Captain. It was thoughtful of you to have the Columbus ready for launch. Marshall knew you were taking her out and nobody batted an eyelash when we left. Of course, they don't know the lieutenant and I are missing yet."

Kirk strained at the straps that bound him. "You're out of your mind! I can't understand. . . ."

Ellers shook his head of curly, black hair. "No, sir, I guess you can't." He turned in his seat to face his commanding officer. Kirk saw the phaser within his reach. "Actually, Captain, I knew it was time to leave when I saw Spock take the Galileo."

Kirk's mouth flew open. "Spock? What does he have to do with this? What are you talking about?"

"It seems that the old Vulcan crone, T'Pau, has provided the Vulcan Council with some pretty strong evidence that the Federation may have been involved in desecrating one of their oldest shrines. Seems Spock's daddy was hurt when some necklace was stolen. Anyhow, the communication frequencies are full of chatter about Vulcans taking emergency leaves, refusing to answer duty calls, and so on. Seems the entire Vulcan embassy has gone home in a huff and things are in one general uproar. And your old buddy Spock is right smack-dab in the middle of this mess, Captain."

Kirk looked to Sara in dumbfounded confusion. She spoke apologetically. "He's right, Jim. It's all over the subspace radio now. Since Spock left the Enterprise, Starfleet has been trying to hold other Vulcans back, cancelling leaves and all that, but things are in a terrific snarl."

"But the Vulcans can't blame the Federation for something like that! It's ludicrous! They're far too logical. . . ."

Ellers was laughing. "That's right, Captain Kirk. They're too logical to overlook hard facts. And they've found certain incriminating evidence left at the scene of the crime. Evidence on a security tape copied from the

Enterprise computer banks. The Vulcans see that as a sign that the Federation was in on it. Of course, Starfleet believes your resident Vulcan had something to do with it, considering all the bad blood lately over this Thormalian mess."

Kirk's mind raced. It was true that the Enterprise computer banks currently held the security designs for several sacred Vulcan shrines. The information had been automatically fed into the ship's computer during their last stop at Starbase, and was due to be discharged at their next port of call. It was a simple matter of data storage until the security designs could be delivered for review and possible revision by upper-echelon computer techs. Such services were offered as a matter of courtesy to all Federation members and the Enterprise had performed many such courier services before.

Spock, as Kirk's first officer, was always made aware of the significance and classified nature of such tapes, but the thought of his tampering with them was beyond imagination. The Vulcan's impeccable ethics would never allow him to betray the Federation or his home planet.

Kirk shook his head, thinking out loud. "Those security tapes passed through other hands before they reached the Enterprise. Someone else was responsible. . . not Spock."

"Starfleet apparently doesn't have your faith in him. They suspect him of being involved because of his computer access clearance and his ties on Vulcan. Then T'Pau engineered a quick leave for him just before the lid blew off. They figure the Vulcans are using this as an excuse to break off the debates."

Kirk muttered to Sara, "I knew something had to be terribly wrong."

Sara's voice was soothing. "I'm sorry, Jim."

Ellers smiled. "You see, the Vulcans claim Spock is innocent. They blame the security leak on your inefficiency and duplicity, Captain. They want Starfleet to bring you up before a general court martial to answer charges of espionage."

Kirk's eyes shone with hope. "Then Starfleet will be searching for us."

"Yes, they are, Captain. But they're finding it very hard to explain why you and your Vulcan friend both disappeared at practically the same time. You didn't really give much reason for your hasty departure. You didn't even log a flight plan. They'll have trouble tracking us when they don't have any idea of where to begin looking."

Kirk realized with a cold knot in his stomach that Ellers was right. McCoy might suspect why he had left, but even he hadn't been told for certain. There was no explanation for his apparent desertion of his ship. And Starfleet would be convinced that he and Spock were united in some plot. He groaned inwardly. If he need not have been overly concerned with Sara's safety, he might have ended all this back on the hangar deck.

Hatred boiled in his heart for the grinning midshipman. "You're the one who copied the tape, aren't you, Ellers? When Spock left, you knew your plot was engaged and that it was time to clear out."

"That's right, Captain. I only transferred aboard as a way to gain access to the computer. You'd be surprised at my many talents. You and your lady friend just happened along at the right time. And if they should catch up with us, I've got a couple of fantastic hostages to bargain with."

"Why, Ellers? Who put you up to this? Who wants to split the Federation by creating suspicion among its members? Is it the Klingons. . . the Romulans?"

Ellers laughed. "Captain, if I told you, you wouldn't believe me!" He turned back to his console. Kirk could hear the communications chatter in the background. It held the dangerous sound of confusion.

"My God," he said, half to himself. "All this, and all I wanted to do was ask Spock what was going on."

"I doubt if he knew, Jim."

Kirk was appreciative of her efforts to comfort him. "It's not bad enough that Starfleet has Spock and me both down as traitors, but now I've dragged you into this. Sara, for what it's worth, I'm sorry."

"I'll be all right, Jim. Don't blame yourself. How could you have foreseen any of this?"

"We might have pieced some of it together, if only I'd caught up with Spock. Heaven knows what's happened to him by now."



The hours had passed slowly for Spock, as he knelt in contemplation within the shrine. The task before him was full of ancient, ritualistic meaning that vibrated in his mind like the strings of his Vulcan lyrette. He faced the mok shri: blood vengeance sworn against an enemy. Sefik's crime was punishable by death, and the traditional combat would make Spock his executioner.

Vulcans were loathe to do violence, but in a situation like this, their ancient passions could be released in fearsome righteousness. Spock was preparing himself for mortal combat in which he knew he would have to kill. It was expected of him.

The knowledge that he must take a kinsman's life was distasteful to him. He and Sefik were the same age. They had been raised together for part of their youth by Sarek and Amanda after Sefik's parents had been killed while serving in the diplomatic service, and their early competition had turned into a deadly rivalry as they matured.

Spock knew that Sefik had never reconciled himself to Spock's hybrid heritage. He had never accepted as fact that the incidence of birth had nothing to do with Spock's becoming more favored than he, and had taken it as a deadly insult when T'Pau had recommended Spock for the coveted appointment to the Academy, even over Sarek's disapproval. After Spock had left Vulcan, he learned that Sefik himself had departed in a jealous rage and that his emotional display had caused him to be considered outcast by the family. They had never spoken of him again. . . until today.

Spock heard the murmur of his father's voice and knew that he spoke with T'Pau as they stood outside the shrine. They kept their voices low in an attempt to avoid

his hearing.

"Thee has news from the elders, Sarek?"

"It was as we suspected. The Andorian is simple-minded. He has told them nothing about Sefik, except that he is assembling a band of associates. Their base is near here, in the T'ik L'al planetoids."

"And the tape that was found?"

Sarek's voice grew hard. "It was taken from the computer banks of the Enterprise. It contained the security code for Vulcan Space Central, as well as the security system for this shrine."

"Have the Starfleet admirals questioned Kirk as yet?"

"No, T'Pau. They claim he cannot be located. They say he left in a shuttle with two of his crew in pursuit of Spock, and has, conveniently for them, vanished."

"Do they send explanation for this?"

"No. They cast aspersions against my son instead. It is fortunate you sent for Spock when you did. All leaves have been cancelled by Starfleet since we challenged them to explain."

"We anticipated that." She fixed Sarek with a piercing stare. "Does thee believe the Federation innocent of espionage, Sarek?"

The Vulcan Ambassador stood in thought. "I find it difficult to believe the Federation would traffic with a band of mercenaries. Still, many of the Council members have been adamant in their support of the Thormalians. Certainly they would welcome Vulcan's silence on the matter so that they might influence both our allies and the uncommitted members to vote for Thormalian membership."

"And the information gleaned from the Enterprise, Sarek? How does thee explain that?"

"Perhaps I am better able to explain, T'Pau." Spock's voice startled them and their eyebrows rose together in the instant they turned to see him standing outside the shrine. "I overheard your mention of the Enterprise." He came toward them, his eyes fixed on his father's solemn face. "You knew the Enterprise was implicated in this matter," his voice was very level in its unspoken accusation, "and you did not tell me?"

Sarek's eyes snapped. "I saw no need to mention it. You have enough to concern you."

"The Enterprise is also my concern. It is my right to know when my loyalty is suspected; it may have compromised my captain."

"You are too protective of your human captain, Spock. There is too much human in you."

Spock's eyebrow angled higher and he moved fractionally closer to his father as his voice grew softer still. "Some would say there is too much Vulcan." He clasped his hands behind him as he spoke. "It is my responsibility as first officer to protect my captain and his ship. I remind you that I abandoned both, at your requests."

T'Pau stood silently, an arm's length away, and listened while father and son duelled with words.

Spock awaited Sarek's answer. It came, after a pause. "We cannot be held responsible for Kirk's impetuous acts."

"Perhaps. But you are in a position to take steps to shield his reputation from slander. You know he is an honorable man."

Sarek met Spock's gaze unflinchingly. "I know only what I learned of him once years ago, Spock."

"I would have thought that sufficient." He gauged his father's stubbornness and knew that Sarek would give no ground on this. "Tell me, at least, what you know of his disappearance."

Sarek spoke no word.

"I have the right to know, if he was lost pursuing me."

Sarek nodded. "This request is logical. We believe his disappearance may be a trick by Starfleet to avoid our closer examination of the facts surrounding the renegades' means of obtaining the tape."

"The captain does not have the knowledge necessary to elicit such security information from the computer banks."

"Who has such knowledge?"

"I do — and anyone else with equal qualifications who may have been brought aboard for that purpose." He left that for Sarek's consideration. "You said two crew members were with him. Do you know who they were?"

"Only that one is reported to be his woman." Sarek's distaste showed in the straight line of his mouth.

"Lieutenant Carstairs?" Spock's face changed subtly. "Then Kirk's disappearance can be no trick. He loves her. He would never involve her in some questionable action." He spoke to no one in particular, gazing past Sarek into the Vulcan sunset. "Did you consider that Sefik may be behind this?"

T'Pau nodded her agreement, following his thoughts.

"If so, it is still a trick, Spock! A clever trick to distract you from your quest. You must not be swayed!" There was a note of command in his father's voice.

Spock's eyes were still focused far away. "If others are to be jeopardized by my actions, I should find it impossible to assume my task." He touched the IDIC at his neck, thoughtfully.

Sarek's voice held the ominous inflexibility of cold steel. "You defy your heritage, Spock?"

The dark eyes returned to the older face. "No, but I would defend my friend."

T'Pau now stepped forward. "Spock, approach us."

He turned on his heel, and Sarek, who had not been summoned, saw the rigidity of his son's spine as he walked away from him. Spock met T'Pau's aged eyes with rever-

ence. "T'Pau, I beg thee, release me from my task long enough to secure my captain's safety. My vigil is ended and I swear, on my honor, that my quest shall be completed once he is safe. It is possible that where I find him, I may find Sefik also. If not, it is obvious that no one will learn the truth until Kirk is found."

The elderly woman swayed on her feet and tapped her staff. Her attendant brought an ornate chair from nearby and she sat stiffly on its edge. Her eyes never left Spock's earnest face. "What thee asks is most irregular, Spock. Thee invites the forfeit."

"I am aware of that, T'Pau." He knelt before her and spoke to her eyes with a confidentiality that she remembered from years past. "Understand, the Enterprise has been my home for years." He waited to allow her full absorption of his meaning. "Kirk is my friend. I cannot complete my task with his blood before my eyes."

She looked at him with quiet interest. "Thee has begged us before on his behalf, Spock. Does this human mean so much to thee? Show us thy mind!" It was not a request to be refused. She placed her skeletal fingers against his face and her eyes grew soft with wonder. She spoke to the face which now could conceal no thought from her. "Thee values him so?" She drew her hand away.

Spock's face would have been unreadable to anyone else. "What is...is, T'Pau. I make no excuses for it."

"And thee is convinced of his innocence and of his peril?"

"Yes, T'Pau, I am." He had not flinched under the impact of her knowing look. "Is he to be denied the chance to prove that innocence?"

"Thee has spoken well, Spock. Understand, if thee fails thy task, thee pays with thine own blood. We cannot alter that for thee."

"I shall endeavor not to fail, T'Pau. . .neither my friend, nor thee."

She spoke with the unquestioned authority of her station. "It is decided! We release thee until thy friend is safe."

Spock's eyes flared a single gleam of gratitude. "I am thine to command, T'Pau." His eyelids flickered. "My father will disapprove."

T'Pau tipped her elegant head slightly to one side. "Does thee think we do not see within thine eyes what we saw in Sarek's when once he came to us, troubled by his own attachment for a human? We shall speak to him, Spock. He should not criticize in thee the echo of his own weakness." She made the Vulcan sign. "Go in peace and find thy friend."

"Live long and prosper, T'Pau." He rose and bowed and left her sitting there; the essence of all Vulcan held within one tiny frame.

He hesitated as he turned and saw his father, but Sarek turned away from him to signify that he would not be acknowledged. Spock felt the burn of the IDIC touch him as he walked down the steps from the shrine into the searing wind.



Kirk felt himself rising up through fog. The disembodied sense of pain and fatigue threatened to draw him down again, like a weight around his neck. His hands came up to his throat to fight the feeling off, and touched cold metal. He could remember Ellers taking him from the shuttlecraft and then the struggle. Then he had been stunned again. Hard to defend against a phaser when you don't have one in return, Kirk thought grimly.

"Sara!" he called, and felt his voice refuse to function in the fog. "Sara!" The sound emerged this time, stronger in its fear. His vision cleared slowly, but he couldn't see her. He stood on shaking legs and tried to move, but the collar on his neck held him back. He fought it and found the chain that held him was fastened to the stone cliff behind him.

He heard the steps approach and turned too quickly. Vertigo hit him with a blinding savagery. Then a cool voice rang in his ear.

"Careful, Captain! One can so easily strangle in those collars. Our ancestors used them to control the trails they took in battle."

Kirk gulped for air. When his vision cleared once more, he saw the slanted brows and dark bangs that belonged to the owner of the voice. "You're Vulcan. . ." was all he had breath enough to say.

"I am Sefik, son of Sarek's sister, T'Mahr," he said, flaunting his superiority with obvious pleasure. "I am a true born Vulcan, Captain, unlike my half-breed cousin, Spock." Admitting his relationship to tainted blood brought an ugly sneer to his lips. He wanted to be absolutely certain that Kirk did not mistake Spock's weaknesses for his.

"Spock's cousin?" He saw him clearly now. The Vulcan features were all there; the pointed ears, dark eyes and hair, the angled brows and strange complexion. He could even see the beat of one green vein in his temple as Sefik spoke.

"Where's Lieutenant Carstairs?" Kirk demanded angrily. "What have you done with her?"

Sefik gestured toward the nearby entrance into a cliff-side cave. "She is within, Captain."

Kirk lunged toward him, but the chain pulled him back. "If you've harmed her. . ."

Sefik laughed, an obscenity coming from a Vulcan's mouth. The sound plunged Kirk into despair. "Don't threaten me, Captain! You are hardly in any position for that. There is really no need for either of you to be harmed. You would not be wearing that slave collar yourself if you exhibited proper behavior. You are too belligerent for your own good."

The Vulcan was testing him. Kirk knew he would have to bide his time, wait for a chance to get free and find Sara. "What do you want with us, Sefik? What's behind all this?" He drew himself up against the Vulcan's height and tried to speak with a confidence he did not feel. "Kidnapping is a very serious offense, and kidnapping Starfleet officers more so! Why have you brought us here?"

"Please, let us not mention Starfleet, Captain. They are no threat to me. I do not recognize their so-called

authority. I am the authority here, Kirk! And your precious Starfleet will be more concerned with disciplining you than finding me."

"You still haven't explained why you had Ellers bring us here."

The eyebrows raised. "True. You, Captain, are bait for a trap." The handsome face was striking in its resemblance to Spock's, but there was a cruelty in it Spock had never known.

"What trap?" Kirk felt his skin crawl.

"One which will ensnare my esteemed cousin. I now possess the two things which he cannot bear to lose: you, and this—" He reached into his tunic and withdrew a heavy medallion for Kirk to see.

The captain recognized a larger, heavier version of the IDIC he had seen Spock wear. "Is that what Ellers said was stolen from the Vulcan shrine?"

"Yes. I am quite proud of that accomplishment. Of course, we never would have succeeded without the tape Ellers supplied from the Enterprise with the security systems all detailed for us."

"Then you're behind all this! You even wounded Spock's father. . .to steal that?"

"This, Captain," and he stroked the medallion possessively as it lay against his chest, "is the IDIC of Surak. It is the most honored symbol of Vulcan."

"You'll never get away with this, Sefik!"

"But, Captain, I already have! While the Federation and my Vulcan brothers quarrel over who is responsible for the theft of the IDIC, confusion reigns. Sweet confusion which allows my followers to gain strength. They gather even now at my stronghold, Kirk. When my business with Spock is finished here, we shall set out to reclaim Vulcan for our New Order. Perhaps we shall wage war against the Thormalian Alliance as well, and shatter, forever, the dream you 'peacelings' have of Federation."

Kirk shuttered at the thought. "Just what is your 'business' with Spock?"

"Simple revenge, Captain. I seek recompense for all the years I, Sefik, of full Vulcan blood, stood in the shadow of that half-breed. He owes me satisfaction, Kirk, for all the honors he acquired at my expense. The quest for the IDIC should bring him here. That is why I had Sarek wounded, to ensure the Council would send for Spock. But you, Captain. . .you are my guarantee that Spock will keep his appointment with his death."

Kirk's blood went cold, but his jaw set with grim determination. "You won't gain Spock's blood through me, Sefik. You may as well kill me now and be done with it."

The Vulcan smiled at him. "No, killing you would be too easy! You will live, Captain Kirk, and Spock will die a little more with every moment."

"You're mad!" Kirk lunged. He knew he could not reach Sefik, but he longed to close his hands around the Vulcan's slender throat. "You're insane, Sefik! No true Vulcan could do a thing like this!"



Cmyro

Sefik's face never altered in expression as he slapped Kirk, hard, with the back of his hand. Kirk's bloodied lip drew a sneer from the self-styled conqueror. "That is not proper behavior, Captain. You must be punished once again!"

Kirk saw the leather strap-like weapon hanging from the Vulcan's belt. The ahn-woon, a most ancient and deadly Vulcan weapon. He had experienced its agonies once before, when Spock had been in pon farr.

"Don't come here, Spock," Kirk prayed silently, as if the thought could act as a charm to keep his friend away. "Please, don't follow me here." He bit his lip as Sefik's first blow landed.



Spock was impressed by the small, responsive vessel designed for speed with which T'Pau had supplied him. He was permitted to carry only the traditional weapons, but the ship had the most modern sensor instrumentation.

He had decided to begin in the T'ik L'al sector that Sarek had mentioned. It had taken the better part of two stardays to get there and the time had not brought him rest or tranquility. Since his arrival in the T'ik L'al sector, he had been scanning almost continually for any sign of another spacecraft. As he prepared to scan the fifth planetoid, the communications panel lit. There was no longer any need to concern himself with the atmosphere of the small world beneath his ship. The humanoid forms he sought were obviously there. They had found each other simultaneously.

He flipped a switch and recognized Sefik's voice as it filled his craft with silken menace. "Greetings, Cousin! I had grown restless with the waiting. Attend me soon, that we may settle this. Your captain grows anxious to see you."

So, Sefik had known he would come. Spock flipped the switch to respond, but before he could reply, Sefik had closed the channel. He should have expected as much. He had been correct in his assumption that Sefik had taken Kirk and the others, but he pushed out all thoughts of Kirk at Sefik's mercy. He must concentrate on mok shri.

Spock pinpointed the location of Sefik's transmission, and landed his craft not far from the cavern entrance he guessed to be Sefik's stronghold. He saw no signs of unusual activity; no great numbers of followers approached his craft. Only as he stepped through the hatchway to the dusty earth did Midshipman Ellers appear with a phaser trained on him. Now Spock understood the meaning behind Kirk's sudden disappearance. Then he saw Sefik, the IDIC glitteirng on his chest.

"I have awaited your coming, Spock."

"I come to do what must be done." He uttered the traditional words. "I challenge you to combat for the satisfaction of mok shri."

"I accept, Spock. I have waited a long time for another chance to beat you. But," his eyes glinted like the orbs of a Cambrian devil-demon, "have you no wish to see your captain?"

Spock's eyebrows raised. "Indeed. And where is Lieutenant Carstairs?"

"Safe, but kept within my cave. She has proven a less effective measure of control over Captain Kirk than I expected."

They walked toward the cavern, and for the first time Spock saw the form chained to the sheer rock wall. "There is no need to treat them in this manner, Sefik. They have no part in this. Release them."

Sefik smiled. "What? Lose my hostages against the Federation? I am no fool, Spock. Besides, the female is appealing and your dear friend, the captain, has provided me a certain entertainment."

Spock glared at him and wondered just how appealing he had found the woman, but he had eyes only for his captain as they reached the cliff.

Kirk sat propped against the wall, head hanging low on his chest. Spock went to him, oblivious of Ellers' phaser. He knelt beside him, aghast at what he saw.

Jim Kirk's face was bruised and bloody with swollen disfigurement and his tunic was in shreds. The flesh that showed beneath it was covered with bloody welts. From the torn condition of his hands, it was obvious that he had tried to defend himself by flinging small stones and dirt which he had stripped, bare-handed, from the surrounding rock.

Spock brushed the dust-filled hair carefully back from Kirk's face and saw the raw wounds the slave collar had raised on his neck. He tipped Kirk's head back, carefully, tenderly, conscious of the pain-wracked frame; he hesitated to touch the lacerated flesh. "You have tortured him without reason, Sefik."

He searched the area for water and saw a beaker of it just out of reach beyond the semi-circle of Kirk's reach. Spock walked over to it. Sefik was there, gloating. "I have my reasons, Spock," he said and saw his meaning strike home.

Spock looked at him as though he were studying some plague virus on a slide. He leaned over for the water and Sefik moved as if to stop him. Spock's voice held a warning. "Do not prevent me."

There was an odd sparkle in Sefik's eyes. "By all means," he said, and stepped aside.

Spock took the beaker and knelt by Kirk again. After dipping his fingers in the cooling liquid, he held the droplets to Kirk's cracked lips. His tongue moved out to take them in and his eyes flickered. Spock held the beaker to his mouth with one hand and supported his head with the other. "Drink, Jim," he said softly.

Kirk drank, then sank against the cliff, exhausted. "I'd hoped. . .you wouldn't come. . ." He choked and coughed. Spock held him against the pain.

"I had to come." He went to work again, tearing a strip from the sleeve of his garment and dipping it in the water, washing Kirk's wounds.

The captain's eyes were clouded with suffering. "Spock, he means to kill you. He's insane. . ." he whispered urgently.

Spock nodded, and began to rinse Kirk's hands, careful of the shredded fingertips. "Yes, I know." He

lifted his eyes to his captain's face. "You should not have followed me. This was mine to do alone."

"Sorry, Spock. I wanted to help. Sorry I made things. . . worse for you."

Spock went back to his task, soothing the chafed neck as best he could. "I shall free you when I see the chance. Be ready," he whispered.

Sefik walked over to them. "Enough of this touching scene! Challenge was given and accepted, Spock. Let us begin!"

Spock stood and faced his kinsman who wore the sacred relic with such lack of respect. "First I would see for myself that Lieutenant Carstairs is unharmed."

Sefik frowned, but motioned for Ellers to comply. The crewman turned traitor went into the cave. A few moments later, he brought Sara Carstairs out into the sunlight. Her hands were bound behind her, her appearance was disheveled, but she was unhurt.

"Mr. Spock!" Sara cried in surprise. "What have they done to Jim?" The first officer started to lead her toward the cliff, but Sefik shoved her down to her knees just out of Kirk's reach.

"You can watch from here, my dear." Sefik turned to Spock. "As ritual demands, the lirpa and ahn-woon." He gestured to the weapons which Ellers had been carrying from the cave. "It is begun," Sefik said, choosing his lirpa.

Spock was aware of Kirk's gaze as he chose his lirpa and placed the ahn-woon around his waist. He would have spoken to him, but Sefik lunged at him with the bladed end of his own weapon.

Spock tripped Sefik with the weighted end of his lirpa and kicked Sefik's weapon aside. Sefik tried to roll away, but Spock was on him, pressing him down into the dirt of their battleground with his lirpa planted across Sefik's chest. Spock's IDIC clinked against the weapon's metal shaft.

Sefik threw Spock off and rolled out of his grasp, back toward his lost weapon.

"Spock, watch out!" Kirk shouted as Ellers moved up and shoved the heavy weapon toward his leader. The Vulcan struck the traitorous midshipman heavily in the abdomen with the blunt, weighted end of his weapon. Ellers fell like a boulder.

Sefik had recovered his lirpa and, as Spock turned from Ellers, he swung hard, aiming for Spock's head. Spock countered the blow with the shaft of his own lirpa, then retaliated with the weighted end by striking his cousin on the shoulder. Sefik fell and Spock was over him again.

The two Vulcans were rolling over each other, heading towards Kirk and Sara. The lieutenant crawled away from the fighting men and closer to Kirk as they came nearer. Sefik dug his lirpa into the ground and using it for leverage, lifted himself up, and threw Spock aside. He scrambled up and unwound his ahn-woon in an effort to entangle Spock, who was now back on his feet and charging Sefik once more. He danced aside, but Spock ran past him and struck the lirpa's heavy end against the ring

which held Kirk tethered in the rock.

As Kirk watched Sara move safely out of harm's way, he felt the chain holding him pull free. He knew that he could use its trailing length as a weapon, even though every movement of it would chafe his raw skin. Sefik and Spock were once more locked together, hand-to-hand, when Kirk made his move, attempting to slip the chain around Sefik's neck before he was out of reach.

"Don't do that, Jim! I really don't want to kill you."

Kirk turned. Sara stood beside him, the fake bonds at her feet, a phaser in her steady hand.

Something in Kirk died. "Sara, what are you doing?"

"Defending my leader, Jim. Please, don't make me fire on you. Sefik has promised to let me keep you as my tral, once Spock is dead."

Kirk staggered forward, as much with shock as pain. "What are you saying? How can you do this?"

She smiled the smile that once had been his comfort. "Spock is your friend. Not mine, and certainly not Sefik's."

Kirk's voice was choked with the realization of betrayal, both personal and professional. "You've been part of this ever since you joined the crew?"

Her eyes sparkled with the pleasure of victory. "Of course! Ellers and I were each other's back-ups. Our job was to copy the tape and to deliver you here, once Spock was called away. If Spock didn't go, we were to kill him and bring you as a hostage anyway. Our affair only made it easier for me."

Kirk's hazel eyes were stone cold. "And these months together. . . were all. . . a lie?"

She shifted her hips. "No, not all of it. You're a very good lover, Jim, but how could being a starship captain's house drone compare to being an empress in Sefik's New Order? You see, I have other cravings to satisfy as well."

Sefik grunted loudly then and Kirk and Sara both turned to watch. Spock had Sefik down again and was angling for a thrust to finish him while Sefik struggled desperately to free himself. Sara brought her phaser up to fire.

"Sara. . . no!" Kirk yelled, and threw his chain around her wrist, knocking the phaser away. She screamed at him in frustration, hauling on the chain with considerable strength. New agony assailed him, but Kirk let himself be carried toward her. After she'd jerked the chain once more, savoring his pain, he was close enough to send a chop-handed blow to her neck.

He did not need to see her fall to know his blow had knocked her out. He whirled and saw Ellers, groggy, but trying to pull Spock off Sefik. There was no time to think of weapons. Kirk sprinted the few yards separating him from them as Sefik, still holding the lirpa, crawled to his feet — only to have Kirk send him sprawling once again when he tackled Sefik at the knees.

Both of them were winded by the fall. Kirk's body screamed at him in pain, but he moved to pin the

maddened Vulcan down. He never made it. Sefik caught him in the chest with one edge of the curved blade. Kirk fell.

Spock finished Ellers with a blow that fractured his skull. He turned to look for Sefik, only to see him blood-smearing, rising to his feet, and smiling at Kirk's body as it lay face down amid an ugly, spreading, scarlet stain.

Sefik never saw Spock coming for him until the double-handed chop smashed into his shoulder. Spock heard the bones snap as Sefik lost his grip on the heavy lirpa. Both Vulcans now were weaponless, but Spock was caught in the despair for revenge. The mok shri held a new and deeper meaning for him now.

Spock's last devastating blow threw Sefik off his feet. He landed heavily on the naked blade of the lirpa with which he had cut down Kirk. Spock saw the green blood glittering through Sefik's tunic and knelt beside the dying Vulcan. He lifted the IDIC from Sefik's neck; the relic was spattered with the ruby liquor of Kirk's life.

"You have defiled a sacred shrine, Sefik. Repent and I shall grant you tal shaya."

Sefik smiled at him sardonically. "The desecration I repent, Spock." His eyes glittered fiercely. "But remember, though you have regained the IDIC, it was I, Sefik, who took from you something else of value to you." The pain began to ravage him as he hissed through clenched teeth. "Now be swift!"

Spock felt an alien, searing bloodlust flood him with the ugly, all-consuming emotion he recognized as hate. Tal shaya was merciful, but Spock's pain knew no abatement.

Then there was only silence.

A horrible sense of loss clutched at him as Spock knelt beside his fallen captain. He was aware of smashing off the hateful collar with a rock, but he could not remember deciding to do it. He examined Kirk gently. Through eyes filled with liquid shimmer he saw that his friend was still breathing shallowly. "Jim. . ." The name escaped him with a feeling he was too drained to repress. He propped his captain's head against his knee, then tore at the sleeve of his garment, using it to make a crude compress. He pressed it firmly over the wound and tried not to let the feel of Kirk's blood move him.

Kirk was whispering hoarsely, pain wracking his breathing. "Sefik?"

"Dead."

Kirk's hazel eyes fastened on Spock, concentrating hard on his angular face to keep out the pain. He tried to nod. "Execution, Spock?"

The Vulcan could not deceive himself. "No, Jim. He would have died from his wound. I desired his death."

Kirk heard the emotional emphasis. He placed one battered hand on Spock's lean arm and spoke with what dwindling strength remained. "Spock, don't blame yourself. . . for this. . . my fault. . . I chose to follow you." His vision was failing him. "I chose to take on. . . Sefik." He fought for breath to finish. "You only did. . . what Vulcan asked of you."

Spock felt Kirk's body relax and sensed the separation. Instinctively his right hand wavered over Kirk's pain-wracked face, seeking the embracing warmth of the mind meld. At the last, he only brushed Kirk's temple, aware that there would be no answering.

Kirk's brown head rolled against Spock's arm which supported it. For an instant his black head bowed above it. "Vulcan asks too much of me," he whispered.

A

Sarek and T'Pau and several Federation security guards were waiting at ShiKahr's spaceport when Spock set the small craft down.

When he opened the hatchway, two muscular guards rushed in to remove his prisoner. Spock scarcely heeded them. During the journey back to Vulcan he had kept Lieutenant Carstairs locked in one of the small state-rooms, out of his sight. Her betrayal of Jim Kirk had reduced her, in Spock's mind, to the status of a non-person. Thought of his now-dead captain had occupied him to the point where there was little room for the contemplation of revenge.

The ancient IDIC dangled from Spock's hand as he left the small ship which still held Kirk's remains. Sarek, his arm no longer in a sling, but with a small bandage around the wrist, waited while T'Pau stepped forward. Her hand was raised in salute, and her eyes turned bright with victory when she saw the IDIC. "Thee has triumphed, Spockh!"

His dull brown eyes recognized her and he returned her gesture. "The task is accomplished, T'Pau." He handed her the precious relic. His voice was like the rustle of dry leaves. "Vulcan has triumphed, T'Pau. Spock has only lost."

The aged woman had noticed the tattered, blood-stained clothes. She cast a look at the young face grown suddenly so old. Something she saw there spoke to her. "We had no wish for thee to lose thy friend, Spockh."

He managed one bright glimmer of his old gaze for her. "He was killed as he struggled to prevent Sefik from escaping me. It is his blood which stains the IDIC."

Sarek joined them. "Then it has been made the more precious, my son. He will be remembered for his sacrifice."

T'Pau had moved away and they could hear the murmuring approval of the other elders as she showed the restored medallion to them. She gestured to Spock and Sarek to join her. They did so, but Spock bowed his head and spoke in a voice the others barely heard. "T'Pau, I ask that the rites of celebration be conducted in my absence. I would keep vigil for my friend."

"Thee is excused, Spockh." Unexpectedly, she laid her green-veined hand on top of his dark hair in silent blessing. It was only for an instant, and then she was gone, lifted into her sedan chair, and surrounded by the elders in triumphant procession.

Spock stood, trance-like, still touched by that instant of compassion. It was Sarek who waved the waiting attendants aboard the ship. "Shall I assist you with the arrangements, Spock?"



Cmyro

He shook his head slowly, as though waking from a dream. "No. I would prefer to give him to the purifying flames of our race, Father, but he has relatives to be considered."

Sarek nodded. "Of course." It would be a cryonic casket for Kirk's final journey through the stars.

Spock's voice broke into his father's reverie. "I shall escort him back."

The Ambassador had not missed the shadows behind his son's gaze. He sensed something there he could not name. He moved closer to Spock in the Vulcan brightness as the procession disappeared from sight. "Come home, my son," was all he said.



Spock's meditation robe held the pungent scent of incense as he left the temple shrine. The warm light of Vulcan dawn was flooding the temple courtyard as he saw T'Pau's sedan chair approaching. Her attendants withdrew as he walked down the steps to meet her.

As he knelt at the foot of her chair, she saw that his face was still bruised and swollen from his battle with Sefik. In the three days since his return, Spock had taken no time to heal himself. What he suffered he bore in silence.

"Thee has kept long vigil, without rest and sustenance, Spockh."

"My duty to Vulcan is fulfilled, T'Pau. My obligations to my friend remain." He peered at her in the growing brightness. "Did my father request thee come to me?"

She inclined her head. "Thy father is concerned for thee, and we wished thee to know we have questioned the woman and the Andorian again. They have confirmed Sefik's guilt in all of this. Our delegation has informed the Federation of this, with appropriate apologies. Sarek and the others will be returning shortly to the council to conclude debate on Thormalia. Starfleet has arrested the other mercenaries and they will all stand trial. Peace and trust are restored and thy friend's name and thine are cleared of suspicion, Spockh."

The ancient lady watched Spock closely. He gave no sign that he had even heard her words. She noticed that his eyes appeared to be seeing something in the distance. Something that was only in his mind. "Thee is still troubled, Spockh?"

His eyes were filled with the dark and heavy woe that knows no solace. "My friend is dead, T'Pau." His voice was soft as starlight. "There is no comfort."

"Thee has thy discipline. Rely on that."

In the odd hours of his vigil Spock had found that his mind would suddenly admit a memory, contrary to his conscious will, of brown hair, hazel eyes and a certain smile. Kirk's loss seemed to make his memory all the more tangible.

Spock shook his head. "My discipline fails me, T'Pau. All my life I have searched for some place where I could be accepted just as I am, for what I am. To Kirk I was Spock, only Spock. For him that was always enough. Now he is lost, and I have no philosophy to help me." He lapsed into silence again. He had no thought to express which would not have reference to Kirk.

T'Pau sighed, almost imperceptibly. "Thee seeks to avoid the pain, Spockh, instead of accepting it. Thee must go beyond the pain and seek the substance." She lifted one long finger for emphasis. "Consider our philosophy of Nome. All are together. All are one. It is the substance of the IDIC's truth that the sum of all becomes greater than its parts. Where thee is, Kirk is also. Thee are together, always. Search thy thoughts for him and he will be waiting. In thee is his continuing, Spockh. Let that thought be the beacon in thy darkness."

She saw a spark rekindle in his face. "That which is true and worthy may be transformed, Spockh, but it is never lost. Remember that when thee remembers thy friend, for it is time for thee to go." She made the farewell sign. "Peace and long life, Spockh!"

Spock stood and returned the salute. "Live long and prosper, T'Pau. I shall honor thee all the days of my life." He found the shining image of Kirk in the back of his mind and took his first steps into the brilliance of the morning.

The Stranger

The moon silhouettes a black horse and a man dressed in black.
It is hard to tell where man and horse begin.
They combine in the darkness.
A mask covers part of the face of the stranger.
His dark eyes watch carefully through the thickness of the night.
He flashes a mischievous smile, which makes his thin moustache
show up even more than before.
His black horse rears, as if catching the rider's mood.
As the horse comes down, the stranger draws out his sword
and he and the horse move as one in flight.
A black cape floats behind the rider, giving an even bigger
illusion of flight.
The stranger has found his target, and with skillful mastery
makes the sign of the Z.

Rebekah

Dreams to Come True

Gatonpaulis

(to "Embrace Me, You Child" by Carly Simon)

At night in bed I think of things that could have been
And dream about the way that things might be:
A time of peace, stormtroopers gone, the Jedi back;
A new Republic shining mightily.

CHORUS: There'll come a time
When things will all be right.
You'll have a planet and a people to rule.
I'll be a Knight
Full of MasterJedi knowledge
And we'll share lives.
I'll be one with you.

I thought that sharing rebel life, Alliance dreams
Would make us equals, Princess, but I see
There's a gulf between a farmboy-pilot and
A royal advisor big as the Dune Sea.

(CHORUS)

One day it will change. One day I'll have the guts
Not to let my Princess slip away.
You will look at me and know I hold you dear;
And we will know the night slip into day.

But for now I'll bide my time, I'll hold my tongue,
And hope that soon you'll choose to turn to me.
Until then my dreams will serve me well, I think;
I know one day they'll be reality.

(CHORUS)

AFTERSHOCK

Debbie Gilbert

Accompanied by transport ships and small X-wing fighters that flew around it like pesky insects, the rebel star cruiser loitered along the fringe of the galaxy, where it was relatively safe from Imperial surveillance. Among its several hundred occupants, word spread rapidly that the long-missing Princess Leia Organa and Commander Luke Skywalker had returned at last.

An anxious crowd waited while the passageway to the Millennium Falcon's hatch was filled with pressurized air. First to emerge from the docking portal was the diminutive princess. She still wore the white snowsuit that had been standard dress on Hoth, and her face looked weary and drawn. Leia stood for a moment, surveying the people before her. She said nothing, but the slight droop to her usually straight shoulders spoke volumes.

As Leia stepped from the platform, she sensed in the atmosphere an almost tangible relief. Intuitively she knew that in the weeks since the Alliance's disastrous failure on Hoth, the loss of two much-admired leaders had maintained tension at a high level and plunged morale to an all-time low. The rebels were basically a tough bunch; in their dealings with the Empire they had seen and experienced much cruelty and injustice. Yet they had not become hardened or insensitive; to do so would be to become no better than the Imperials.

Leia scanned the crowd as she disembarked, aware of the questioning looks from her comrades. Among the sea of faces, one projected itself from the others, one warmly familiar — General Rieekan's. Leia's happiness at seeing him again was tempered by apprehension. What private theories had he formed about her long absence? And what must he be thinking of her present entourage?

Her thoughts were interrupted as Chewbacca lumbered up behind her. She stepped aside and looked up, far up, to meet the Wookiee's eyes. The loyal partner of Han Solo was wearing an expression which, in human terms, could only be described as distraught. The Wookiee was accompanied by a devilishly handsome black man. Between them, they supported Luke Skywalker, whose face was bruised and lacerated and whose faded rebel uniform was covered with dried blood. The youthful commander was fully conscious, but he scarcely glanced at the crowd, and did not speak.

General Rieekan rushed forward and gave Leia a quick embrace, speaking everyone's thoughts as he said, "Thank the Force you're safe. We've been so worried. . ."

"We haven't been exactly carefree ourselves," Leia answered, smiling.

Once the initial relief at seeing the group alive had passed, the rebels were unable to contain their curiosity. Questions flew thick and fast: "What happened?" "Did you meet up with Vader?" "Where's Captain Solo?" "Where have you been all this time?"

Leia held up her hands, and spoke in a stern, tightly controlled voice.

"Your questions can all be answered later. Commander Skywalker requires immediate medical attention."

At these words, several human medics and Onebee surgeon-droids hurried forward to offer assistance. One of the droids scanned Luke, and quickly announced his preliminary diagnosis: "Exhaustion, exposure, numerous

cuts, bruises, second-degree burns, right hand severed at wrist. . ."

Involuntarily Leia's gaze fell upon the end of Luke's arm. Reminded anew of the disfigurement of this healthy young man, her stomach wrenched with horror.

A pair of medics took hold of Luke's shoulders and gently eased him on to a stretcher. One of them whispered, "Damn, all this filth is just an open invitation to infection."

The other tried to reassure their patient.

"Don't worry, kiddo, we'll get you into some bacta fluid right away."

Luke responded with a grim smile, and his words were a weak but obvious attempt at humor.

"Please, not again."



In the largest briefing room of the star cruiser, Leia sat quietly, studying her small white hands clasped on the table in front of her. The conference was due to begin in a few moments, and she needed to summon strength for what she knew was going to be an emotional ordeal. Her mind was still in a turmoil over the recent events in her life, and though she did not really feel like discussing them, she knew that the others had a right to know anything which concerned the rebellion.

Leia sighed inwardly. God, she was tired. Though there had been time to rest, she had been unable to sleep. Now she could feel the fatigue and depression creeping throughout her body, but her role as leader had quickly taught her how to conceal this fact from the others. She couldn't let her moods affect the morale of her followers.

At least I feel clean now, Leia thought with relief, recalling the luxurious sensation of the long hot bath she had taken as soon as she had settled in her new quarters. Now she was dressed in the white robes denoting royalty. She had not worn them since the rebel forces had left the base on Yavin, a lifetime ago it seemed. She looked almost like her old self, but she knew she was not the same person she had been. None of them were.

The room was now almost filled with people. Anyone with the smallest excuse to attend was there. Leia felt eyes upon her, and turned to her left to find herself looking into the face of Lando Calrissian. He gave her a reassuring smile and placed one brown hand over both of hers. The princess found that her attitude toward the man was beginning to mellow though she still didn't trust him. She knew that this was his first encounter with the rebellion, and wondered what he thought of them. Could he be persuaded to join their struggle against the Empire? Lando didn't seem the type, but then, neither had Han. No, mustn't think about Han. Too painful. She forced herself to dwell upon something else. An image of Luke's tortured face appeared in her mind. Leia Organa, you should be ashamed of yourself, she chastised. Here you are, fine and healthy, yet wallowing in self-pity. Be grateful you're not the one suspended in that slime they call bacta fluid.



Luke was experiencing a distinct feeling of deja vu

as he felt the red gelatinous liquid begin pouring down over his bare shoulders. He did not remember much from his first experience in the fluid and his muscles were tense from anticipation as well as pain.

"You must relax," admonished Too-Onebee, "or the bacta will not have a chance to work."

Luke nodded. Using the disciplines he had learned on Dagobah, he flushed the tension from his body. Calm, passive. . . The warm, soothing bacta was not unlike the amniotic fluid present in the womb, and Luke began feeling drowsily secure. He fell into a light slumber; his breathing became even. This peaceful state of affairs lasted until he entered REM sleep and began to dream.

He was all alone in the universe, except for an evil omnipresence which was intent upon suffocating him. He called out to Ben, pleading, down on his knees, "Help me, please!" No answer. Everywhere he turned, he confronted the metal breath screen, the sinister glow of inhuman eyes, the thickly padded black gloves reaching for him, grabbing at him, the rasping voice coaxing, "Join me, join me. . ."

"No, no, NO!" Luke awoke, disoriented, trying to focus his eyes through the murky bacta.

"Are you all right, sir?" asked the droid, managing to sound concerned despite its mechanical voice.

"Yeah, I'm okay," Luke gasped, "just — just do me a favor, will you? Please. . .don't let me go to sleep again."



Leia felt totally drained after briefing her attentive audience on the events since their hastily exchanged farewells that last dark day on Hoth. With herculean effort, she had kept her voice free of emotion when she spoke of Han, omitting any mention of personal involvement with him. She could sense the surge of anger which swept through the crowd when they learned of Vader's treachery on Bespin.

"But remember, there is still every reason for hope," she said bravely. "Captain Solo is not dead. He is alive. We must believe that until we can prove otherwise." With some dismay she realized that her earnest voice was betraying her. Quickly switching to an icy tone, she prompted, "I think Baron Calrissian has a plan of action he would like to discuss."

"Yes, I — well, like the princess said, the Empire has taken over my mining colony on Bespin, so I guess you might say that that leaves me out of a job. And since I'm, uh, kinda responsible for what happened to Han, I feel it's only right for me to go out and track down that bounty hunter. I can leave as soon as the Falcon gets a thorough checkout."

Several of the rebels offered to join him in his search, but Lando shook his head. "Chewbacca will be with me, and that's plenty of protection. Besides, it's too risky for any of you to leave this outpost right now. If I get captured by the Empire, there's not much I can tell them about the rebellion. Your secret is safe."

Leia stared at Lando, surprised at this astute bit of reasoning.

"But what about Skywalker?" a young woman wanted

to know. "Where was he from the time he left Hoth until he got in the fight with Vader?"

"I don't know," Leia admitted. "He hasn't spoken of it. At the time, I had assumed he had made it to the rendezvous point like everyone else."

The woman corrected her gently. "There were many who didn't make it to rendezvous."

Leia was stunned by the girl's words, realizing as if for the first time how many rebel soldiers had sacrificed their lives in that bloody battle in the snow. Sadness coursed through her, leaving her quiet and subdued.

"I suggest," she said slowly, "that we all observe a moment of silence in remembrance of those who died for our cause." And let's hope that Luke and Han don't join their ranks, she added privately.



Luke couldn't remember whether he had been asleep or unconscious, but upon opening his eyes he was grateful to find himself positioned horizontally on a soft, dry bed. He glanced down at his right forearm, which was now encased in a support unit until a prosthetic hand could be constructed. The idea of a mechanical appendage did not appeal to him, but it was far better than just a stump there for the rest of his life. The wound was smooth and even, for the lightsaber had cauterized the vessels instantly, minimizing the loss of blood. His biggest

problem had been shock, and he had weathered that successfully on the Falcon. Luke wondered if he would ever handle a lightsaber again. Right now, he didn't even possess one. His own had vanished into unfathomable depths, along with his hand.

He remembered when Ben Kenobi had given him the weapon. Words floated back to him from one of the most memorable days of his young life:

"Your father wanted you to have this -- when you were old enough. . . . A young Jedi named Darth Vader -- betrayed and murdered your father."

Again the question which had agonized Luke since he left Bespin returned to haunt him. Why had Ben deliberately lied to him? If what Vader had said was true -- and in his heart, Luke knew that it was true. He knew it just as surely as he had known that Han and Leia were in danger while he was on Dagobah.

But why, Ben, WHY? The person Luke had trusted most in the universe had failed him. Was there anyone left in whom he could believe? Was he just a gullible kid who allowed himself to be taken in? Had Ben manipulated him? For what purpose? And whose lightsaber had Luke actually been given? Angry, frustrated by the questions that tormented him, Luke stretched out with his thoughts, grasping for something which had no substance. Damn you, Ben, answer me! But it was as if the entity of Obi-wan Kenobi no longer existed.



Breathing heavily from his effort, Luke sagged against the pillow. Suddenly his eyes opened wide with discovery. Yoda! Surely he, as a renowned Jedi master, would have the answers. And with Yoda's tremendous command of the Force, he ought to be able to sense Luke's thoughts even at this distance.

Clenching his fist, squeezing his eyes shut, Luke concentrated as he never had before. "Yoda, hear me..." But he could sense only a deep and lonely void. Finally he gave up, and lay trembling, bathed in sweat. Involuntarily he half-sobbed, and whispered, "Why? What have I done to deserve this?" But a small part of his thoughts answered, "You were fathered by Lord Vader." Luke felt his entire world crashing down around him.



Fortified by an interlude of sleep, Leia's step was sprightly as she hurried toward the star cruiser's medical complex. Moments ago she'd been informed that Luke's bacta treatments were completed and he was now allowed visitors. She was surprised at how anxious she was to see him.

"Let's see," she mumbled to herself, "112. . .113. . . 114, that's it." The door was ajar. Leia entered quietly, not wanting to disturb Luke if he were asleep. She was in the foyer when she saw him, and froze.

Luke lay unmoving on the hospital bed, staring up at the ceiling with an extremely peculiar expression on his lean face. Something about him made him appear very old, yet at the same time he looked younger than Leia had ever seen him. As she watched, a tear emerged from the corner of one blue eye and slid sideways down his cheek, to be intercepted by an ugly red scar. He did not even blink.

Leia hesitated. She felt she was intruding upon something very personal, but decided to take that risk.

"Luke? Are you in pain?"

It was obvious from the young man's startled reaction that her visit was totally unexpected. He sat up immediately, dragging a sleeve across his eyes, and flashed a too-quick smile.

"Oh, no. No, I'm fine, thanks."

Leia didn't believe him. She crossed the room and sat on the edge of the bed. She fixed her gaze upon his face, her eyes imploring him to be honest with her.

"Luke," she said intensely, "what did Vader do to you?"

He laughed harshly. "I think that's pretty obvious," he answered, raising his right arm slightly.

"That isn't what I mean, Luke, and you know it. I don't think you were injured only physically. Something's happened to you. . ."

He averted his eyes.

"I know you probably don't want to talk about it, but if something is bothering you, perhaps it would help if you—"

"No, it wouldn't." Luke shook his head wearily.

But Leia was not easily put off. "Back on the Falcon," she ventured, aware that she might be treading thin ice, "you kept saying something to yourself, something like 'Ben, why didn't you tell me?' I didn't pay much attention then, but now I realize that that meant something to you. What didn't he tell you, Luke?"

Silence.

"It occurred to me — maybe you were upset because Ben failed to teach you enough. Could it be that he misled you about the power of the Force?"

"No, no, it's nothing like that. Leia, please. . ."

"Luke, I don't mean to push you, and I'm not trying to pry into your personal affairs. But there was something my father once told me, something I've always remembered, and I think it applies here. He said that by putting your troubles into words, you can gain insights into solutions. And it works. At least, it usually has for me. So if you've got a problem, I'd like to help you work it out. I'm asking you — let me help."

Luke stole a glance at her, and she found herself overwhelmed by the strange mixture of emotions contained in that look. There was the pain of withholding a terrible secret; there was pleading to be understood; most of all, there was tremendous longing — for what, Leia didn't know. He seemed on the verge of blurting out everything to her, but fear obviously held him back.

"I'm sorry, Leia," he said at last. "There isn't anything you can do. The problem is me. I've . . .acquired knowledge about myself, and I'd prefer not to discuss it with anyone. At least, not yet."

"All right," she said, trying to hide the hurt she felt. "I've got to go now, but remember, I'll be here if ever you need to talk. Take care of yourself, Luke."

"You too."

She left the room, feeling more disturbed by Luke's behavior than she cared to admit. He used to trust me. What's happened to the Luke I once knew?



Aboard the Millennium Falcon, Lando Calrissian jumped back as a shower of sparks erupted from the control panel.

"Chewbacca," he yelled. "Shut down the whole port side."

Throwing down a wrench in disgust, Lando sat down on a none-too-clean piece of machinery, and surveyed the clutter surrounding him. It had been a long time since he'd worked on the Falcon, and the knowledge of its mechanisms had been shoved far back into his memory. In addition, Han Solo's 'special modifications' had left him completely unfamiliar with some of the ship's parts.

Fortunately, Chewbacca seemed to know what he was doing. He was being unusually tolerant and cooperative — probably, Lando suspected, because the Wookiee saw him as the only means of getting his captain back.

The project was also being assisted by the two droids. Or at least, by one of them. Artoo's skills at

repairing equipment had proven invaluable, but Threepio's constant chatter had begun to grate on Lando's nerves, adding to his already considerable agitation over the ship.

As if on cue, the golden robot shuffled into the hold. "Excuse me, sir," its metallic voice prattled, "if you don't mind my saying so, I think that—"

"Threepio, why don't you run up and see if Leia needs anything?"

"But sir, she asked me to come down here to see if you needed anything."

Lando sighed. "Well, just run along, will you? Take a break. Get some lubrication, or whatever it is you droids do."

"Certainly. It's obvious that I'm not needed around here." Trying his best to look offended, Threepio left.

Lando resumed pondering the maze of switches on the control panel, but his mind kept straying to thoughts of the new people in his life.

Skywalker. Who is he? Just a fresh-faced kid, yet everyone around here seems to consider him important. And where in the world did he find the guts to enter into a one-on-one duel with Lord Vader? He survived, thanks to Leia.

Leia. Now there is one fine lady.

And where do I fit in? Lando wondered. Since the seizure of Bespin by the Empire, he really had nowhere to go. Did he want to stay here? Could he consider becoming a rebel? Two weeks ago he would have laughed at the idea. He still had his doubts about the people here. They were different from any he'd ever been associated with — all so serious and intense, yet they cared a great deal for each other. And despite his efforts to demonstrate his nonchalance, Lando found that he was beginning to care, too.

Jolting himself out of his reverie, Lando pushed these thoughts aside. First on the agenda was finding Han and bringing him back safely. Everything else could wait.

Picking up a soldering iron, he called out, "Okay, Chewbacca, let's try that number nine panel again."



Luke lay in the oppressive darkness, feeling trapped. There was no sanctuary from the turbulence in his mind. The same worn-out themes ran through his tired brain again and again, and he was unable to shut them off. Sleeping or waking, it scarcely mattered anymore. It was all one continuous nightmare. And he was beginning to see visions. Whether he was seeing them through the Force, or merely hallucinating, he didn't know.

Most of the time, however, it was the memories which troubled him. Just remembering the mysterious cave on Dagobah, he could feel the dank cold, see its reptilian inhabitants slithering along the walls, smell the stagnant odor of rotting organic matter, sense the presence of death. Terror gripped his heart again as the towering figure of Vader bore down upon him. Instinctively striking out, putting every bit of strength into a desperate lunge, feeling the heat of the sparks against his body, watching the decapitated head of Vader

as it rolled through the muck, staring numbly at his own face inside the black helmet — Luke recalled every detail. Only after he had been rescued by Leia could he begin to fit the pieces of the puzzle together.

Well, now I know, Luke thought bitterly. And Yoda — Yoda knew that I would find out about Vader. That's why he tried so hard to dissuade me from going to Bespin. So at last the whole charade of my life is played out and I know who I am — the son of Darth Vader.

Luke still could hardly even think those words without flinching.

Was there any real significance to that? So he shared half of Vader's genes. Were people's lives controlled by heredity? Did he necessarily have to become like his father? "It is your destiny," Vader had told him. Could Luke change what was meant to be? Had his path already been decided for him? He knew there was some predestination involved in the Force. Yet Yoda had said, "Always in motion is the future."

Slightly heartened by this thought, Luke drifted into an anxious sleep.

As an unattached bystander, Luke saw Darth Vader present an infant to people he immediately recognized as Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru. "Keep the child until he is grown," he rasped, "then he is mine forever."

All at once Luke was twenty years old and running along a road towards Ben Kenobi. "Got to hurry to Alderaan," he told himself, "got to save the princess." But when he reached Ben, he saw that the old man had been transformed into Vader. Terrified, Luke turned to run, but tripped and fell. He raised his head only to come face to face with Yoda. The little creature stood before him and croaked in mocking tones, "Never will you be a Jedi; there is too much of the dark side in your soul. Born under a dark star are you — born to evil. Look at your friends. Unhappy they are — because of you. Told you I did, told you I did. . ."

Luke suddenly felt himself falling, and ended up in a circular room which proved to be a deep pit. He heard people screaming — Han and Leia! They must be behind the wall! He tore and clawed at its surface until his fingers bled, but he could not get to them. Then he sensed Vader in the pit with him. "You are trapped. There is no way out. Son, come with me. It is the only way." There were lightsabers floating all around, yet Luke could not reach any of them. Vader drew closer and closer, while the pit itself seemed to shrink. The black figure was only inches away, its powerful hands stretching toward him. . .

Luke jerked himself awake, eyes open in the darkness. The firm mattress beneath him served as a reminder of where he was, but the knowledge held no reassurance.

Abruptly he sat up, squeezing his temples, and cried out through clenched teeth, "I can't live with this anymore. I can't!"

He lurched from the bed, ignoring the dizziness which assailed him instantly. The sound of his own heartbeat was deafening, and he fought down the nausea which crept upward. His mind raced.

There was one way to end this torture — the only

way. He must end his life.

Stumbling around the dimly lit room, he opened drawers frantically until his hand contacted the coolness of metal, and he withdrew a small, sharp surgical instrument. Luke couldn't begin to guess at its function. He held up the object before him; it gleamed, reflecting the saturnine light from the hallway. For a long while he stared at it, as if hypnotized.

God, what am I doing? You're not in your right mind, Skywalker. Not rational. You need to sit down, to think this over calmly. . .

But he could no longer think at all. His brain burned; he could see only a gigantic flaming sphere. And suddenly he was on his feet, running blindly, unconscious of what he was doing or where he was going. But his lips moved of their own accord, forming the word 'Leia'.



It was very late in the star cruiser's 'night', an arbitrary time period established for the sake of convenience. Princess Leia was in her chamber, moving about, for sleep would not come to her. She felt a strange unrest, though she couldn't pinpoint its source. She stood in her white dressing gown, dark hair flowing down her shoulders, as she gazed out the tiny porthole. It was a splendid view of the galaxy, but the sight produced only one thought in her mind. Han was out there, somewhere, among a million suns.

At least she had a small ray of hope; Lando had announced his intention to leave the next day once he replenished the ship's supplies. The sooner the better, Leia thought. Who knows what's happened to Han in the time we've wasted.

An agitated knock at the door interrupted her thoughts and she cursed silently. Visitors this late at night never brought good news.

Standing by the door, she called out somewhat warily, "Who is it?"

A voice, faintly, "It's me. Luke."

Without hesitation, she opened the door. "Luke, why aren't you—"

The look on his face made her pause. Blue-black circles under his eyes were accentuated by his deathly pallor, and the eyes themselves held the look of a man who has seen some unspeakable horror. His breathing was rapid and uneven, as if he'd been running. He appeared so unbalanced that Leia might have been afraid had she not known him so well.

"Come in. Sit down." She guided him to a couch and settled herself beside him. "Now, what is it? What's the matter?"

Luke tried to speak, but could not get the words past the constriction in his throat. The tears were welling up and he had no power to stop them. Painful sobs racked his body as they spilled down his face.

Leia rested a hand on his arm and waited, not knowing what else to do. She had never seen him like this, never imagined he could be like this. Until she knew the reason for Luke's distress, there was nothing she could

do to alleviate his suffering.

At last the crying subsided, and Luke tried to still the spasms of his diaphragm. He licked his lips, tasting the salt of his own tears. Suddenly self-conscious, he looked up at Leia.

She was smiling gently at him.

"Feel better?"

"Not yet."

"Ready to talk?"

He nodded. She got up, returned with a glass of water. "Here. Tell you what. Why don't you begin at the beginning, and make it easier on both of us?"

"All right." He swallowed. "When I was lying in the snow, I mean, back when we were on Hoth, Ben Kenobi came to me and told me to go to Dagobah and—"

"Where?"

"It's a planet not on the star maps, but a great Jedi master lives there, and I was supposed to study under him. So, instead of going to rendezvous, I went there, and started my training. That is, I did after Yoda — that's the master's name — accepted me as his student. And I was making pretty good progress, too, until I saw you and Han."

"You saw us?"

"Through the Force. I knew you were being tortured, or rather, that you soon would be, so I had to leave. Yoda warned me not to," the tears edged into Luke's voice again. "He said I wasn't ready, that I would destroy everything you had fought for, but I didn't listen. I came to Cloud City and had the duel with Vader. But Leia, I was doing really well. I wasn't afraid, not at all. For a while, I even thought I had him. But he was too much — too strong for me. He had me cornered on this platform. That's where he did this to my arm, and then. . ." Luke stopped at this point, unable to go on.

"And then?" Leia prompted.

"Then. . .that's when he told me."

"Told you? Told you what?"

"I — I can't. . ."

She grasped his shoulders, forcing him to look at her. "Come on, Luke, please! I want to help you."

"It's. . .it's about my father."

"Your fa— wait a minute, Vader killed your father, didn't he?"

"That's what I said," Luke answered dully, "but he told me — he told me, Leia. . ." He took a deep breath, and looked her squarely in the eye. "Darth Vader is my father."

For perhaps the first time in her life, the princess was totally at a loss for words. A full minute passed as she stared at him, paralyzed. An entire spectrum of emotions coursed through her. She saw Luke's face as he

watched her expectantly, waiting to see how she would take this informational bombshell. In a very detached portion of her mind, she noted that his scars had almost healed.

When she finally spoke, her voice was tinged with anger. "How can you accept what he says? You know that Vader would lie just—"

"I can't explain how I know that it's true," Luke replied earnestly. "I just... feel it. Believe me, I've tried to deny it, but it's no use."

Another long moment passed. Leia seemed to be searching herself, coming to a decision. She straightened, set her chin firmly. When she spoke again, it was with her customary poise.

"So, Luke, how do you think this affects you?"

"I don't know," he faltered. "I keep getting these implications... from him, from Yoda... that I'm somehow doomed to become like him."

"Do you know what I think?" she said, choosing her words carefully. "I think that's a ridiculous notion. Why should you do a complete turnabout in personality simply because you found out who your father is?"

He shook his head, not looking up.

She continued, "I mean, you've always been a very kind person, who can't stand to see injustice done to anyone. Now, I could hardly describe Vader in those terms. If you were going to take after your father, don't you think we'd have seen evidence of that by now?"

"Yeah, maybe. But sometimes I think I'm just not — not good enough."

"Good enough for whom?" she asked sharply.

"Good enough to be a Jedi, or to be in the rebellion. I mean, sometimes I think of things that are... evil."

"So do we all. It's part of being human. Everyone has a little of the dark side in them."

"Even Ben," Luke muttered.

"What?"

"Nothing." He got up and began pacing the room.

"I've been thinking, Leia. Maybe it would be better if I left."



"Don't be foolish, Luke. We need you."

He whirled to face her. "But how do you know I won't betray the rebellion?"

"Do you want to?" she asked quietly.

"No. . .no, of course I don't."

"Then don't worry about it. Trust me, Luke. Or more important, trust yourself."

He sat down again, frowning. She moved beside him, putting her arm around him.

"Would it help if I told you that I don't think any less of you because of this? I don't give a damn who your father is. Honest, I don't." She kissed him lightly.

Luke stared at her, amazed; he had never heard her curse before. Still tingling from the pleasant effects of her kiss, he smiled for the first time.

"Thanks, Leia. I don't know what I would have done without you. I really mean that."

She grinned back at him, almost shyly. "Yes, things really have been in a mess lately, haven't they?"

A wistful expression fell upon his face. "You know, sometimes I almost wish I was back on Tatooine, where I never did anything more complicated than repair a broken vaporator or shoot the guts out of womprats in my T-16."

She nodded. "I know what you mean. Sometimes I feel that way, too — about Alderaan."

Surprised, Luke regarded her thoughtfully. Suddenly the curtain of idealism no longer clouded his sight. This was a living, breathing human being before him, not some object to be idolized. She's always seemed so mature, he thought, yet she's really not older than me. And I certainly don't hold the corner on grief; she's had more than her share. But she hides it so well, always caring about others first. She deserves to have someone care about her.

Impulsively, Luke put his arms around her and hugged her warmly.

"It's going to be all right, Leia," he whispered. "All of us — we're going to be all right."



Luke couldn't guess exactly what time it was when he finally left Leia's chamber, but he knew it wouldn't be too long before a new activity period would be signalled and people would be emerging from their rooms. He wandered the hallways, feeling utterly depleted, yet even now not ready to surrender himself to sleep. The thought of returning to his barren hospital room was more than he could stand. Without really planning it, he found himself in an observation lounge on the starboard side of the cruiser.

It was quiet, so very quiet. Luke moved softly, afraid to break the silence. He crossed to the couch, sat, and gazed long at the stars, almost hoping that if he stared at them hard enough, some great eternal truth would reveal itself to him. He had always found the stars to be a comfort, something relatively constant to serve as

a backdrop for his turbulent life. A few short years ago, on Tatooine, he had watched the stars and wondered if he would ever venture out among them. Now it seemed like he spent most of his time in this hostile yet familiar environment.

Luke's thoughts halted as he sensed another consciousness intruding upon his own.

Someone was in the room with him.

He turned, and saw Leia standing, statue-like, the darkness lending an eerie glow to her white robes.

"How did you find me?"

"I don't know. Just had a feeling you'd end up in a place like this."

"Must have been the same feeling that sent me in here. Come and sit."

His eyes followed her as she moved toward the couch. She appeared to be almost floating in the half-light.

"So, don't you ever sleep?"

"I couldn't. My conscience wouldn't let me."

Luke's eyebrows rose in surprise. "Why not?" He peered at her, trying to make out her expression. Was he imagining things, or was she actually nervous?

"I was feeling, well, rotten, because after I went and dragged a confession out of you about something so very personal, it didn't seem right or fair for me to be holding back secrets from you."

Luke said nothing. His eyes remained fixed on her face.

Ever the diplomat, she seemed to be searching for the words that would make this easier for both of them. "After you left Hoth, you encountered events that caused changes in your life. Well, I also found some changes along the way. Do you remember, back on the Falcon, when I told you about what happened to Han?"

"Of course I remember. What happened to him was actually intended for me. If that's what's bothering you, Leia, don't worry. I'm sure Han will turn up all right. When does the search mission leave?"

"In the morning."

You should be on that mission, Skywalker. What kind of a friend are you, anyway? He pushed this thought aside to concentrate on what Leia was saying. There was a faraway sound to her voice, a hint of nostalgia.

"You know the way Han and I have always been — well, at each other's throats?"

Luke laughed. "Do I ever! You have no idea how Han complains to me. 'Save us from princesses', he says. But listen, don't let him get to you. I know Han, and I know he just acts that way to cover up how he really feels."

Leia smiled, softly, shyly. Luke wondered if she was blushing.

"I know now, for certain, how he really feels. Luke..." She paused, and all of her natural eloquence seemed suddenly to desert her. "Luke, we — Han and I — on the way to Bespin, and while we were in the city, we became —involved. . .romantically." She looked carefully away, unable to meet his eyes. "I'm in love with him."

Luke paled. He felt as if a giant fist had slammed into his stomach, knocking the wind out of him. His mind reached backward in time, and with hindsight he could see the foreshadowings of this, on Hoth and even before. He should have seen it coming, but he had always been preoccupied with the rebellion and with learning about the Force. Or maybe he had noticed the budding love relationship, but subconscious denial had kept him from acknowledging it.

Words poured forth from Leia in an earnest rush. "I'm sorry, Luke. You've always been very special to me, you know that, and I know you've. . .had affection for me, too, but I had to tell you this because I didn't want you to be misled and then get hurt later on and—"

"Leia, shut up."

"What?" she said, taken aback.

"Shut up, Leia," he repeated, gently placing a finger on her lips. He was smiling. "I don't want to hear this."

"But—"

"What happens between you and Han is none of my business. You don't have to tell me about it."

"Luke, I—"

"I don't own you, Leia, and I don't pretend to. You're free to do as you wish and you don't need to apologize for doing it."

"You're not upset?"

"Upset? No, I'm not upset. I just wish Han were here so I could tell him what a lucky guy he is."

"We're still friends, then?"

"We'll always be. How could I help but be your friend?"

She sprang up and kissed him soundly. "Oh, Luke, you don't know what a relief it is to hear you say that!"

He rubbed his cheek where her lips had touched. "Wow, two in one night. I must be doing something right."

"You are, believe me, and I can't thank you enough for it." She started toward the door. "Now maybe I can go back and get some beauty sleep."

"Beauty sleep? You don't need any."

She grinned. "Don't flatter me. What about you, aren't you going back to the infirmary?"

"Not a chance. I don't see why I can't just sack out right here."

"Well, try to get some rest. You still look like death warmed over."

"Sure. Thanks for the compliment."

"Anytime. Good night again, Luke."

"Good night, Leia."

Once more Luke was alone with the stars and the silence. He sighed profoundly, and threw himself full-length across the couch, momentarily raising his eyes to the viewing portal. With a million stars for an audience, he addressed himself:

"Luke Skywalker, you are one hell of an actor."

With that, his eyelids closed, and he was pulled to the furthest depths of exhausted sleep.



Fusion of the newly-built cybernetic hand to the end of Luke's arm was nearly complete. Luke was seated comfortably in an operating chair, watching as the surgeon-droid tested the circuitry and made final adjustments. Suddenly the door opened and Princess Leia swept into the room, trailed by her two faithful droids. Luke's breath caught at the sight of her. With her hair worn elegantly atop her head, and a soft radiance about her face, she looked almost exactly as she had that day in the throne room, an eternity ago, when she had presented Han and Luke with medals for saving the rebel base from destruction. That was a day which Luke would always cherish. He had been just a naive kid, dazzled by it all, but he well remembered the atmosphere of elation and hope. And we deluded ourselves, he thought, into believing that all the suffering ended with the Death Star. Or at least, I did.

Luke could see that Leia's thoughts were apparently not dwelling upon the tyranny of the Empire at this moment. "Hi," she said cheerfully. "Feeling whole again?" She peered at the surgeon-droid's handiwork.

"It's going to take a little getting used to."

"Lando will be leaving any minute. That's why I came by."

Pretending to sulk, Luke said to no one in particular, "And I thought she came to see me."

"That too," she answered playfully.

An electronic tone sounded from Luke's comlink.

"Could you hand me that? It's on that table. Thanks."

He was greeted by a male voice, resonant despite its filtered quality.

"Millennium Falcon here. Anybody listening?"

"We read you, Lando. Go ahead."

"Luke, we're ready for take-off." His voice held a trace of satisfaction, as if he were mentally adding, at last.

"Good luck, Lando."

"When we find Jabba the Hut and that bounty hunter," he spat out the words contemptuously, "we'll

contact you."

"I'll meet you at the rendezvous point on Tatooine."

Lando's next words were spoken tenderly and with as much sincerity as he could muster. "Princess, we'll find Han. I promise."

"Chewie," Luke addressed his furry friend, "I'll be waiting for your signal."

The time had come to bid farewell, but Luke refused to say it; 'good-bye' had such an air of finality to it. Optimism was the key here. He must make Leia feel that this was a beginning, not an ending.

As if conferring a benediction upon the pair, Luke said quietly, "Take care, you two. May the Force be with you."

In answer, Chewbacca supplied them with a long, drawn-out howl. Though Luke wasn't fluent in Wookiee, he could guess at the sentiments conveyed. Apparently the princess did too, for she couldn't keep a grin from spreading across her face.

Two-Onebee signalled for Luke's attention as he made one last test. Through an open panel on the underside of Luke's wrist, the droid stimulated each of five mechanical 'nerves' and observed as the corresponding fingers flexed. Then he pricked the palm of the hand sharply to test the pain indicators.

"Ow," Luke protested.

The droid seemed satisfied. It sealed the panel and removed the protective cuff. Luke flexed his fingers experimentally, made a fist, then relaxed. The sensations he was getting felt pretty weird, but it was a relief to have two hands again.

He glanced up at Leia. She had moved over to the large rectangular window, and was waiting to catch a glimpse of the departing ship. Again Luke felt a pain of regret for not going along on the rescue mission. He had been very strongly compelled to join Lando in the search, for, other than the princess, Han was his closest friend. The Corellian had stuck his neck out for Luke on more than one occasion. "That's two you owe me, junior," Han had teased. Luke wanted to repay the debt, but he was

torn by conflicting desires. Until he completed his training on Dagobah, he felt he would be of no help to anyone. It was imperative that he become a full-fledged Jedi knight as soon as possible. Somewhere out there, Darth Vader was waiting for him. Inevitably, they would meet again, and Luke knew that this time he must win. He had explained this to Leia, and she had understood.

Now he rose from the chair and moved to stand beside her, studying her surreptitiously. She seemed unusually vulnerable, and all at once he figured out why: her iron control had been relaxed and her face was now plainly readable. A multitude of emotions was manifest in her eyes — fear, hurt, longing. After a moment's consideration, Luke put his arm around her. He was pleased to find that with his new hand he could still detect the softness of her body. She seemed so small, so fragile; Luke felt an overwhelming surge of protectiveness toward her.

Together they watched in silent communion as the Millennium Falcon hovered into view and maneuvered into position. Its engine promptly ignited and the craft rapidly picked up speed, soaring toward the glorious spiralling galaxy whose image filled the entire window.

Luke briefly returned his gaze to Leia, and he knew that at this moment her thoughts were with Han. Once, that knowledge might have made him chafe with jealousy, but now he merely accepted it. Leia was very precious to him, but he did not wish to have her as a lover. It was difficult to describe their relationship, for she was many things to him — friend, sister, mother, confidante; more than anyone else in the universe, she understood and believed in him. On the darkest night of his life, he and Leia had become forever linked, and their mutual anxiety over Han served only to strengthen the bond.

Satisfied that Leia would be all right, he again lifted his eyes to the splendor of the galaxy. Around one of those myriad pinpricks of starlight there revolved a mundane little planet, a world full of murky swamps, a totally uninviting spot. Yet, unlikely as it seemed, it was that place which held the secret, the meaning for his existence. Luke had no choice but to return to Dagobah immediately. Even now, grave questions haunted him, daring him to discover their solutions.

Luke would not rest until he had the answers.

A Quiet Moment

A quiet moment in a place apart.
I sit alone in a darkened room,
Trying to sort out the pain,
Remembering you by my side
Through all the long years
Keeping at bay all the nightmares,
Bringing the sun.
Now my shield and protection is gone,
My defenses all shattered,
And the long slow business of learning
How to live alone begins...again.

Marion McChesney

LIFE IN THE SPACE LANES

Jani Hicks

(to "Life in the Fast Lane"
by Don Henley, Glenn Frey, & Joe Walsh)

He was a hard-headed man, he was brutally handsome;
She was terminally pretty.
She held him off, though he had held her for ransom
In the heart of a cold, cold city.
He had a nasty reputation as a cruel dude;
They said he was ruthless, they said he was crude.
They had one thing in common — they were good in bed.
She said, "Got to hit hyperspace — the lights are going red!"

CHORUS: Life in the space lanes, surely make you lose your mind;
Life in the space lanes.

Heated for action, hot for the game;
The coming attraction, just more of the same.
They knew all the right people, he had all the right shills;
They hauled outrageous cargo, they charged outrageous bills.
There were cracks in the mirror, lines on his face;
He pretended not to know they were caught up in a race.
In the cantina until it was dawn—
He was too tired to make it, and so she was gone.

(CHORUS)

Alone, late, and burnin', lookin' for the worst,
He didn't see the blaster, though he wouldn't be the first.
She said, "Listen, Solo, I can make those engines sing—
Been all up and down the space lanes hasn't proved a goddamn thing!"
He said, "Call a healer cause I think I'm gonna die!"
"The healer said he wouldn't come; your price is way too high!"
So they jumped .5 past light speed — they couldn't get lost;
No one yet has showed them what their reckless lives will cost.

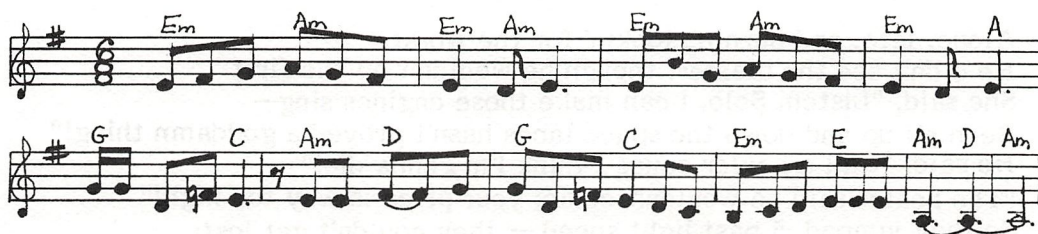
Filks by

Speaking Glances

Why are you staring at me that way?
What is it you expect me to say?
Tell you that I care? Ha, that's not true.
I don't feel a thing
For a nerf-herding scoundrel like you.

Why are you looking at me like that?
I feel like a mouse observed by a cat.
My hands are dirty; they don't need your touch.
(But why don't a nice man's lips
Arouse me as much?)

Please stop looking at me that way.
Your eyes are speaking what your lips won't say.
So I must say it: "I love you."
"I know," you answer;
And your eyes add, "I love you, too."



Gatonpaulis

One Rebel Pilot

It's been nothing but flying, and flying, and flying
For nearly a month or two.
Long days and long nights, long briefings — long flights
Losing half a pilot crew.
The death and destruction I've lived through already
Would crush another soul.
But strange as it may seem, I'm living my wild dream—
As one rebel pilot I'm whole.

The family I've known has passed on to the Force—
And so have my two dearest friends.
The princess ignores me, and Han tolerates me—
The droids' bickering never ends!
But once in my fighter I'm no longer lonely;
The power I wield suits me fine.
We skirt close to danger; but, somehow, it's strange,
I don't feel that my life's on the line.

I was told that my father was a pilot before me—
The best in the galaxy;
That I'd picked up his touch of blending my skills such
As to fly a ship perfectly.
If that is the case I am more than delighted
To have that link with him.
That legend will live on; and flying, we'll be one—
Skywalkers and pilots and kin.

If I never get bonded, or never to know love
Somehow I'll survive all the pain.
I'll marry the X-wing; we'll merge and be one thing,
And we'll space out again and again.
For flying in space gives an ultimate glory
That heart-bursting feeling's my goal.
In danger or peace, my desires won't cease.
As one rebel pilot I'm whole.

As one rebel pilot I'm whole.



Luke's Lament

GATONPAULIS

(to "His Friends Are More Than Fond of Robin"
by Carly Simon)

Her friends are more than fond of Leia.
She never has to compliment them.
And always when she leaves, she leaves them
Feeling proud just to know her.
When Leia's deep in rebel meetings
There's a void around the rebel base.
Oh yes, there's thousands at the base
But no one like Leia.

CHORUS: Leia, I've never told you
But I'll be yours until we're old.
Please, learn to call me in your dreams.
The way I'm looking at you is just as it seems.

She's talked about before she gets there
Though she can never understand it.
And I would like to be hers alone
But how can a farmboy demand it?
When Leia goes off to be with others
There's a pain and sadness in my heart.
There can be no others in my heart.
My love is just for Leia.

(CHORUS)

YOU CAN'T GO HOME AGAIN

Pat Nolan

Damn! Why did I have to volunteer? Luke Skywalker berated himself as his ship, the *Spes Novis*, dropped out of hyperspace just beyond Tatooine's gravity well. Because you owe it to Biggs. He's dead, nothing can change that. He'd prefer that a friend brought the news home.

"Tatooine Control to approaching vessel, identify yourself. Do you copy?"

"I copy, Tatooine Control. This is the *Spes Novis*, Captain Jeaan Geerafat in command."

"Use landing pattern Tau Beta, and berth in bay forty-eight. Do you copy, *Spes Novis*?"

"I copy, Tatooine Control. Tau Beta to berth forty-eight."

For the next few minutes, Luke was too busy to think about his mission or to sort out his private feelings. There would be time for that later. Right now he had to get through customs and keep a low profile until he was out of Mos Eisley.

Stepping out of the *Spes Novis*, a small, light personnel transport, Luke straightened his flight suit. He hesitated a moment before leaving the safety of the docking bay, and then, hefting the two pieces of luggage he had brought with him, set off.

A sleepy-eyed human clerk manned the desk in the otherwise barren Port Authority office. He hardly glanced up as Luke entered the climate-controlled room. The mere fact that the air-conditioning was at maximum

labeled the Imperial official an outworlder.

After registering with the bored inspector, Skywalker glanced at the wanted posters covering one wall. He was startled to see a new one sporting Han Solo's face, but at least there were none of Luke himself.

No one would recognize him, he was certain. Though he had only been to Mos Eisley once before, he was not taking any unnecessary chances. To disguise himself, he had donned brown contact lenses and a black wig in a style unlike the one he usually wore.

Leaving the building, Skywalker heaved a sigh of relief. He was glad that the shielded compartment holding his lightsaber had escaped detection and that his Alliance-supplied forged documents had passed inspection.

Once out in the open, he headed for a nearby landspeeder dealer's establishment.

"Good afternoon, kind sir," the rotund proprietor greeted Luke as he entered the vehicle lot. "What can I do for you?"

"I need a landspeeder."

"I have a nice XP-38 that I can let you have for... oh say thirty-five hundred credits."

"No thanks. I only want to rent one for a day or so."

"Ah ha! Perhaps you would like this one," the dark-skinned humanoid said, pointing to a not-so-new green-and-yellow speeder. "It's only been used a few times, and

I can let you have it for only fifty credits a day plus fuel."

Skywalker stared at the disreputable-looking vehicle and shook his head.

"Then how about the one next to it?"

Luke nodded. "How much?"

"Seventy a day, plus fuel."

"Much too high." The Tatooinian youth mentally counted up his resources. All told, he had only a hundred credits expense money and he needed to think about food and lodging for the night. Even in Anchorhead, prices would not be cheap.

"Well. . .perhaps sixty would be more reasonable."

"Fifty, including fuel."

"Fifty, plus fuel. . .and it's a steal at that."

"No," Skywalker replied, turning to leave. "I can do better down the street."

"All right. . .all right," the dealer grumbled. "Fifty including fuel."

The haggling finished, Luke finally signed the contract, turned over his money to the salesman, and threw his two pieces of baggage into the back of the nearly new tan and brown XP-38 landspeeder. He climbed into the bantha-leather upholstered cockpit, started the engine and set off to retrace the route he had followed with Ben Kenobi and the two droids. . .how long ago had that been? Three weeks ago? Or had it been four? So much had happened to him in the interim.

Just beyond the environs of Mos Eisley, Luke stopped the vehicle while he removed the contact lenses and wig. Now that he knew there were no wanted posters out on him, he felt safe enough to discard his disguise. Reaching into his carrybag on the seat next to him, he pulled out an old, sun-bleached, floppy-brimmed hat and put it on. He had forgotten how hot Tatooine was. Nevertheless, it felt good to be back.

Engaging the auto-pilot, Skywalker leaned back in his seat and relaxed, allowing himself to get caught up in memories of the past.

The fourteenth anniversary of his natal day dawned clear and still. There was no trace of the sandstorm that had swept in from the Dune Sea early the previous afternoon, almost catching him without shelter as he raced home from Toschi Station in his landspeeder. Today, if he worked things right, he could finish his chores early and meet Biggs out behind the South Ridge. Biggs Darklighter, his best and practically only friend, had promised to take Luke flying again. For the last couple of months, Biggs had been teaching Luke to fly. Luke was proving an apt pupil, and the older boy—

" . . .Luke, breakfast is ready."

"Coming, Aunt Beru."

Sliding into his seat at the table, Luke saw his aunt and uncle exchange looks.

He searched his conscience. "I'll check those

vaporators on the South Ridge first thing this morning," he promised.

"Never mind, they'll keep one more day."

He stared blankly at his uncle, not fully comprehending what he had just heard. Usually, Owen Lars could think of more than enough work to keep Luke busy on school holidays.

"You deserve a day off for your natal day," Beru explained with a smile.

"There's something outside we think you'll be interested in," Owen added.

Luke jumped up from his chair.

"Finish your breakfast first," Beru ordered, and he reluctantly sat down again.

"What is it?"

"Wait and see," Owen replied, winking at Beru.

As soon as he finished, Luke ran outside, followed closely by the aunt and uncle who had been foster parents to him since he was four.

In front of the garage was the most beautiful skyhopper Luke had ever seen. Eyes wide with excitement, he turned toward the Larses.

"I . . .I don't understand."

"Happy natal day, Luke," Beru said with a smile. "We knew you wanted one."

"Th. . .thank you both." He kissed Beru and Owen. Their love and caring was almost palpable, making him feel closer to them than he had since his arrival at the farm ten seasons before. Suddenly, his secret dream of attending the Academy seemed that much closer. He would be a pilot, however. . .not just a navigator like Uncle Owen said his father had been.

"Your school work and chores must come first," Owen said gruffly in a voice filled with emotion.

"Don't worry about that," Luke assured him eagerly. "Can I try it?"

"It's yours."

Skywalker climbed up to the cockpit and settled himself in the high seat, smelling the fresh, clean aroma of new leather as he touched each control and lever in turn. Wouldn't Biggs be surprised when they met! Today they could go out to Beggar's Canyon for some real flying. Reaching out, Luke switched on the ignition—

The insistent beep of the auto-pilot alarm brought Luke back to reality. He switched to manual control and changed direction for the fastest course for the Darklighter homestead. While the vehicle could travel without human guidance, it was not wise to do so in the back country where Tusken Raiders often lay ready to ambush any unsuspecting human.

Biggs. . . . The familiar surroundings brought rushing back a host of memories and feelings that he had managed to suppress since the battle over the Death Star,

feelings that the victory celebration and hurried evacuation from Massassi Base had not left Skywalker much time to sort out. Even now, guiding the landspeeder across his homeworld, he had little leisure to ponder the changes in his life.



It seemed much too short a time before he topped a rise and found himself looking down at the Darklighter homestead, several small buildings clustered in a deep hollow. Although showing a lack of recent maintenance, nothing seemed changed from the last time he had been there just before Biggs had left for the Academy, except that, if anything, it was quieter. There was no sign of the hired hands, and Luke assumed that they must be out somewhere, working.

The sound of the landspeeder's engine, however, brought a stoop-shouldered, grey-haired woman out of the house.

Skywalker climbed out of the vehicle and walked over to greet her.

"What do you want?" she asked sharply. She stood with her arms crossed over her chest and her shoulders hunched. It appeared that she hugged herself protectively as if against attack.

"Kera Darklighter," he began, suddenly unsure of what to say to this woman he had met only once or twice before. "I don't know if you remember me...but I'm Lu--"

"I remember you, Luke Skywalker. You're the one was always talkin' about goin' to the Academy...givin' my Biggs ideas that Tatooine wasn't good enough for him..."

"That's not true!" Luke protested. "We both agreed we wanted to fly..."

"I didn't see you go to the Academy," she accused, waving a finger at him. "Only Biggs-- And them Imps been here lookin' fer him, sayin' he's a deserter. Well, I don't know where he is. So get back in your fancy speeder and leave me alone. You done enough to hurt me."

Luke swallowed convulsively. He had not expected this type of reception. He stared into her hard black eyes and his courage almost failed him. It would be so much easier to turn around and run back to Mos Eisley. He could send her a note alone with Biggs' personal effects. Dammit! Are you scared of one little old woman?

"I have some bad news for you, Kera Darklighter." He inhaled deeply. "Biggs -- Biggs is dead." The word hung in the still air for a moment, and then the woman's hand went to her mouth.

"No...that's not so. He...he jumped ship. They couldn't have caught him...not my boy. You're lying!"

"I wish I were," Luke said softly. "But I -- I saw it happen."

"Where?" she demanded.

"We were flying for the Alliance...and...and he died saving my life," he finished lamely. "I want you to know how sorry I am." He rushed on without giving her a chance to say anything else. "And I brought you his

things...as well as the condolences of the Alliance leadership. He was a brave man and a good pilot--"

"Get out."

"What?" Luke asked in disbelief.

"I said, get out! If you're not off my property in five minutes, I'll have you arrested as a rebel. Isn't it enough that you talked him into going to the Academy?"

"It's not like that at all!" Skywalker protested. "He--" Faced with her implacable expression, he could think of nothing more to say. Turning, he walked back to the landspeeder and climbed in. He picked up the large bags holding Biggs' things.

"Just leave 'em there and go away."

"Yes, Kera..." he said, dropping the satchels.

He hit the ignition switch and the landspeeder shot forward, soon leaving the Darklighter homestead far behind. Glancing around at the bleak, tawny terrain, he realized how small he was in comparison. A wave of emptiness engulfed him. He felt a sudden urge to go back to the Lars farm -- or at least to what was left of it. In his haste to bury his aunt and uncle, Luke had not checked to see if anything of his past life were salvageable, and right now he needed a quiet place to think.



The relentless desert sands had already reclaimed part of the Lars' place and there was very little left to identify it as a once-working farm. Of course he should have expected that everything salvageable would long since have been cleaned out by passing Jawas. Still it was a shock to see the empty, burned out shell that had been his home for sixteen years. Even the hastily dug graves of his aunt and uncle had been all but obliterated by the winds and storms of the few weeks since his departure.

A feeling of desolation swept over him and he wanted only to get away from the memories this place held, but first he had work to do. Luke climbed back into the landspeeder, and proceeded to the nearest water well.

Water was too precious a commodity to waste, and the habits of a lifetime were too deeply engrained to be forgotten within a few days.

Skywalker found the first vaporator standing like a skeleton in the harsh light, stripped of all removable parts. It seemed to beckon to him, pointing upward toward the sky. He got out of the vehicle, and after making certain the machinery was turned off, tightly capped the well.

Finished, he straightened up, stretching taut back muscles, got back into his speeder and proceeded to the next well. At this rate it would be another six hours before he would finish.

For the first time, Luke realized that there was no place for him on Tatooine. It was no longer safe. Yet he did not want to return to the Alliance. He did not owe them anything. The princess was safe and the Death Star had been destroyed. Yes, the more he contemplated the idea about not re-joining the rebels the more he liked it.

Admittedly, the *Spes Novis* was an Alliance vessel,



he recalled, but he could park the ship on another planet and leave notification of its location at one of the rebel information drops. He would then take himself off somewhere and try to forget all about the Alliance and the Empire's price for a few moments of glory.

Finally, finished with the tedious task of closing down the farm operations and totally depressed by the dreariness of his former home, Luke turned the speeder around and set course for Mos Eisley.

I can't even sell the farm, he thought grimly, though he had no need of it, and the credits would have come in handy. It would mean divulging his identity to government officials and risking possible capture. Better to leave it abandoned until it was confiscated for non-payment of taxes.



The suns were beginning to set, streaking the sky with shades of lavender and pink, when Luke entered the busy main street of Tatooine's port city. With the coming of the evening cool, pedestrians were hurrying about, in contrast to the leisurely strolling that characterized daytime movement on this planet.

After returning the landspeeder to the lot, he headed for the cantina where he had met Han Solo and Chewbacca so long ago. The dim coolness of the cantina was welcome after the day's events. No longer unsure of himself in such surroundings, Skywalker ordered a drink and pushed his way through the crowd. He found a seat at a small table in the back of the room.

Taking a cautious sip of the firedigger, he nodded approvingly. The spicy, potent drink was exactly what he needed. He took a larger swallow, leaned back in his chair and forced himself to relax. He ignored the raucous sound of the jazz band and the loud, discordant strains of conversation drifting toward him from the other patrons.

Luke again had an opportunity to ponder the changes in his life. Damn! Why does everyone I care about have to die? Mother: I can hardly remember her. Uncle Owen said she injured herself getting me out of the wreckage of the passenger liner that brought us here after Father's death. Beru: she deserved better than being shot down by the Imps. I never even told her I loved her; now it's too late for anything. If I had used half the brains I was born with, I would have left that blasted restraining bolt on Artoo; maybe together Uncle Owen and I could have held off those troopers.

Nah, Obi-wan was right, there was nothing I could have done to save Owen and Beru. But at least I could have died with them, and not caused anyone else's death. Biggs might still be alive if it had not been me in that trench on the Death Star.

Still, the Imps might have found and destroyed Massassi Base if we had not gotten the Death Star plans to the Alliance in time. Dammit! Either way I would have caused Biggs' death -- and the other.

Well, he's the last. I won't be responsible for anyone else being killed. Ever. What's the Alliance to me anyway? Beru and Owen would still be alive if it hadn't been for the rebellion and old Ben. So why should I go back? What do I owe them? Nothing.

But Han and Leia are there.

So what do you wanna do? Get them killed too? he answered himself. Best for all concerned if you just stay here...get a job on some moisture farm and forget all about rebels and the Empire. You don't care what Biggs said; the Imps aren't gonna want anything from this dustball.

Yeah, but that doesn't really change things, does it? The Empire's still gonna go around murdering innocent people...just to gain its own ends. Look at Alderaan. It hadn't done anything to deserve being destroyed, yet the Empire did it just to prove a point -- that no one can withstand Imperial might. Well, the Alliance shows that even the Empire isn't invincible.

Still, they're gonna have to do it without me.

Several drinks later, Luke was feeling light-headed, and began to wonder if maybe he should get some dinner. He had not had anything to eat since leaving Eran Base early the day before.

Rising slowly and carefully, he was startled when a black-skinned human stopped at the table. With a look of relief the man peered at Luke.

"I need your help," the man whispered insistently, giving a quick, furtive look over one shoulder.

"Huh?" Skywalker asked bewilderedly, sitting down once again. Without waiting for an invitation the other slid into a seat next to him.

"You're Luke Skywalker, aren't you?"

"Who?" Luke asked, suddenly feeling uncomfortable about this meeting.

Not easily deterred, the other added, "I recognized you from the medals ceremony on Massassi Base."

Oh, no...not the Alliance...again. "So? What of it?" Skywalker shrugged. "There were lots of people there."

"But only one who blew up the Death Star," his guest said, sotto voce. They both glanced around quickly but no one appeared to have overheard the remark.

Luke smiled in spite of himself. No matter what he had decided to do, he would always remember that event with pleasure -- even if the adulation that had come his way afterward made him feel uncomfortable. Besides, Biggs -- and Han -- deserved some of the credit for that victory. "So?"

"I need your help. I have information which I must get back to our primary base."

Eran, Luke thought, where Leia is and Han and Chewie may still be -- if they haven't left by now. "I'm sorry but I can't help you."

"What do you mean you can't help me? It's vital that our leaders get this holo-disk."

"Not our leaders," Skywalker replied. "Yours."

An odd expression shone in the other's amber eyes, and Luke dropped his gaze.

"You're one of us," the dark-skinned human

reminded him.

"Not anymore," Skywalker replied decisively. "I've decided not to risk my life for nothing."

His companion stared at him in disbelief.

"Look," Skywalker continued, "so far, all your damned rebellion has gotten me is the death of everyone I ever cared for. I—it's not worth it. The Empire hadn't hurt me before I got involved with the Alliance, and now I want to be left alone."

"Where will you go? It won't be safe for you to remain here."

Luke smiled tightly. "There are a lot of worlds along the galactic rim. I'll get lost on one of them."

"But if you believe in the rebellion—"

"I don't, dammit!" Luke retorted in a savage whisper. "It was all a grand adventure...something different. But it turned out wrong. And now I'm gonna find something better for myself, safer."

The Alliance agent studied him a moment. Seeing the Tatooinian's stubbornness, he shook his head sadly. "I'm sorry you feel that way. We need good pilots."

"You'll just have to do without this one. Good day."

Without bothering to look up, Luke picked up his glass and took a healthy belt of his drink. The other man sat still for a few minutes and then rose from his chair and left.

A twinge of remorse made Luke glance up toward the departing agent. He was just in time to see a brown-cloaked alien wearing a trunk-like breathing apparatus follow the rebel from the cantina.

Damn! thought Skywalker. He rose slightly unsteadily. Gulping down the rest of his drink, he set the glass back on the table next to its empty companions and weaved toward the door, intending to trail the rebel.

Outside the cantina, it was twilight. Luke needed a few seconds before he spotted his quarry rounding a corner. Trotting after the pair, Skywalker turned into a dimly lit alleyway just as the sound of blaster fire broke the stillness. Without breaking stride Luke drew his blaster, prepared for anything. The brown-cloaked alien looked behind him, startled at the sound of running feet. Spotting Luke, he raced off, leaving the agent lying in the street. Skywalker turned over the body and gagged when he saw the gaping burn hole in the man's chest that still steamed faintly. The eyelids fluttered and the man stared up at him, accusation in the pain-filled amber eyes. His mouth moved but no sound was audible. Then the body shuddered once and was still. The agent was dead. Searching quickly, Luke found the holo-disk. He stood holding it for a few moments, staring at it. His fingers clenched spasmodically over it and he felt the sharp edges of the plastic case cutting into his palm.

What in Vaygra's ten hells do I do now? he wondered disgustedly. He could not remain where he was. Without thinking further, he straightened up, slipped the thin plastic case in a pocket, and started back to his ship.

No sooner had he made it to the main street,

however, than he saw a squad of Stormtroopers bearing down on him. Panic welled up in him for half a heartbeat and he forced himself to remain calm. After all, he was innocent...

"Did you see anything?" the troop leader demanded abruptly.

"Yeah, a couple of guys ran toward that alley over there," said Luke, pointing back the way he had come. There was nothing they could do to the dead agent, and Luke had the precious information.

"Come on, men." Without a backward glance, the Imperials trotted toward the alley.



Back aboard the *Spes Novis*, Luke locked the hatch and performed his pre-flight check before engaging the engines.

"*Spes Novis* to Tatooine Control, requesting departure clearance."

"Tatooine Control to *Spes Novis*, you are cleared for corridor Phi Delta. Clear skies, Captain."

"I copy, Tatooine Control. Thank you."

While the powerplant warmed up, he removed the tape from his pants' pocket and studied it, turning it over and over in his hand. If he took it to the Alliance base on Eran, he would be helping the rebels of his own volition. He would no longer be able to claim that it was only fate that had pushed him into acting against the Empire. Did he want that? Or did he want to take the safe way out? By choosing the latter course, he eliminated any possibility that he would help kill his friends, or for that matter, anyone else. But had not his inaction resulted in the anonymous Alliance agent being killed? Damn! He glanced down and saw blood on his hands. He tried rubbing it off but it only smeared more. How did he know that inaction on his part would not bring even more danger to his friends? It was possible that no matter what he did or did not do, someone would die eventually. He rubbed his hands on his pants even harder.

So what are you gonna do, Skywalker? Sit here like a lump? Or will you take matters into your own hands? He rubbed his hands together; the stain remained. He would have to wait until he was in hyperspace to go to the head and get rid of it. You never liked the Empire. And look at Leia. She's sacrificed even more than you have. She watched her whole world be destroyed. Can you equate your losses with her? If you don't go back, you'll be helping the Empire just as surely as if you had turned in the tape and its carrier. Yeah, but--

But nothing, kid, you made your decision when you left the cantina.

I suppose....

He reached for the controls. The blood was no longer on his hands.



The ship lifted off smoothly and was soon space-borne. Luke made a few rapid calculations on the navicomputer and entered the coordinates he wanted. He inhaled

deeply, and punched the hyperdrive button. In a few short hours he would be back on Eran Base — where he belonged, at least until victory was achieved. It was not

home — but then neither was Tatooine anymore. He smiled tightly. Still he had a place somewhere: with Red Squadron and the people he cared about.

WISE CHILD, RECKLESS MAN

Wise child, reckless man.

Devoted friend, stern authority.

Cunning opponent, wide-eyed lover.

Complexity within mystery: How
can you be both at once?

The study

of such contradictions could be endless
if

its subject would refrain

from turning to grin and answer empirical enquiries

with blunt, persistent curiosity

about the observer!

Infuriating

Intriguing

Incorrigible

Illogical

Captain!

ADVICE

Loneliness is poison

black as the spreading veil of space
dimly lit by dusty stars,

but

happiness is neither

drug nor antidote to be taken

once an eon until the supply runs out,

and

bitterness is a weapon

used more in suicide than war.

So,

shed the angry pride that ulcerates your heart,

free the captive Memory who steals your life,

lose the fear-dreams that mock your hope.

You

need not run toward life,

only

do not let it get away!

James T.

Square jaw below flat planed cheeks,
heavy brow above shuttered tawny glance,
full lips

about to speak.

No voice comes,

no life stirs the image

except that caught, fleeting, by a light-trick,
freezing time.

And

if the image stood here,
the man:

I would wish myself;

Scalos' Deela, hidden in plain view,

Blind Miranda, seeing his garden-Earth,

Silent Gem, hearing love in his pain,

Proud Uhura, unashamed to speak.

But who is he?

Fleeting image, living man,

unknown, familiar,

bewildering, beautiful

James!

Ronni Sacksteder



The Freeverse Adventures of 3 Women in Search of an Elephant Paula M. Block

(who has the least amount of brain damage)

It was the worst of times,
It was the worst of times,
Hell, it was worse than that

It was about 100 degrees in Brooklyn
and even the cockroaches were sweating
but the ladies had come on a mission
and they were damn determined to carry it out

"We must get our parcel to Hamill," they cried,
even though the frankincense and myrrh
were melting even as they spake

Even though at that very moment they were discovering
that Brooklyn is no place to park a car from Minnesota
Even though at that very moment they were discovering
that Manhattan was no place to carry an innocent 35-mm camera
Even though at that very moment they were discovering
that what they call subways in New York are called
'men's bath houses' in many other states

The play was already closed by the time they arrived,
but what did they care, these plucky (wacko) women
They had their faith, they had their mission
(So, I have heard, does the Salvation Army)

So they road the steamy subways with the slimes
And they walked the sahara asphalt with the slimes
and they fed the N.Y. pay phone mafia with the dimes
and were eventually out of a helluva lot of money

But who cares, it will all be worth it...

IF IF IF
BUT BUT BUT

Faith just ain't enough sometimes
Sometimes missions don't pay off
A play will untimely close
A Hamill will untimely move

So they decided to salvage their pride and lick their wounds
and escape from New York with their lives,
if not much else,
seeking consolation in a private showing of the Mark Hamill film festival
and a bottle of Kentucky moonshine
in Chicago, where you can park your car or carry your camera
with relative safety

Consolation was short-lived
for the Millennium Datsun expired of a broken heart
as it attempted to wind its lonely way onto the final leg
of the sorrowful journey
(It's currently in carbon-freeze in Oak Lawn, Illinois)

All that
And nothing to show for it
Nothing to say, "Hey, it was worth it" about
Because there wasn't any chance to say
Nothing at all, but anyway, wouldn't ya think
After all that, Hamill would feel really crummy
that he did all this to these poor deluded zealots
who may suffer permanent brain damage
or at least a severe loss of faith
(which is worse, these days, when brain damage
can pull you through urban madness)
as a result of this witless crusade to deliver a precious parcel to him?

You wouldn't?
Well, hell.
You're smarter than we was.
But don't feel too bad

It is the worst of times,
It is the worst of times,
But we can pick it up a little
With another glass of corn squeezings.

The Man in the Cold Steel Mask

MARCIA BRIN

He stared at the ship and cursed it. Damn stabilizer. There was never any indication that a problem was developing; it had, in fact, checked out fine last port check. Now, this. Damn. With an especially valuable 'cargo' in the hold, too. Not that he had to worry about it, really. Thanks to Lord Vader, his cargo would keep quite nicely.

The delay, though, that bothered him. He had already wasted enough time chasing that damn Corellian. Grudgingly, he conceded that Solo had been the cleverest, toughest quarry he had ever gone after, and, privately, was more than a bit disgruntled that he had needed the Empire's help. All he wanted to do now was dump the son-of-a-bitch, collect his bounty and seek easier prey.

Before he could do that, however, he'd have to fix this damn ship. He had the parts and a working knowledge of the system — no pilot could afford to travel without spares and at least a minimal ability to do temporary repairs — but it was not his forte. A shame he had to leave Solo in cold storage; the Corellian was considered nothing less than a genius when it came to things mechanical, especially if they could fly. Notwithstanding this, the wisest course would be to leave his prisoner right where he was.

It did, however, tickle his rather grim sense of humor to think of Solo being forced to repair the ship that was carrying him to his doom.

The ship had arrived in the middle of the night, and was sitting there, silent and ominous, when port per-

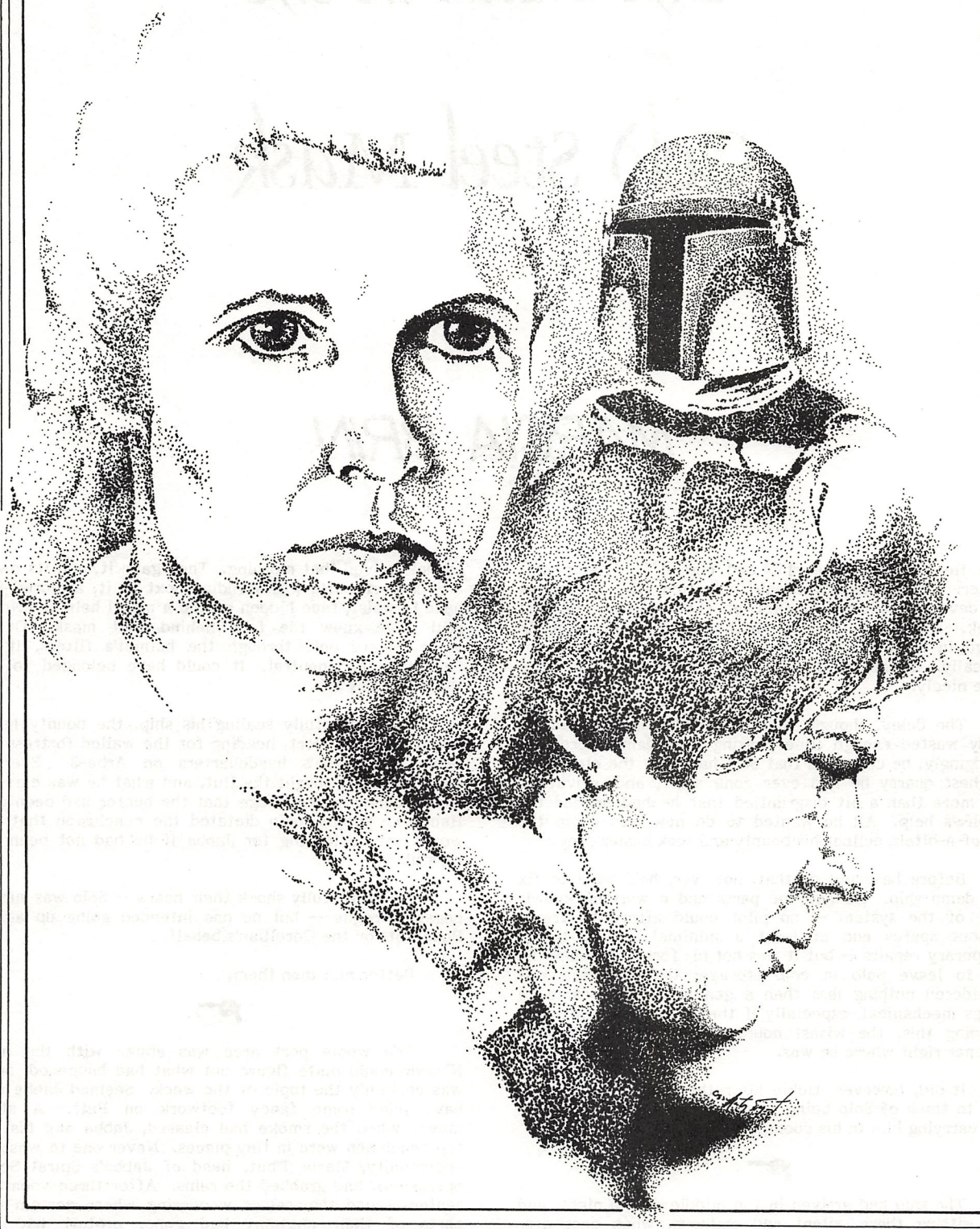
sonnel arrived that morning. They gave it, and its owner, a wide berth. He was standing next to it, armored from head to waist, face hidden behind a metal helmet. No one still alive knew the face behind that mask. Or the voice. Heard only through the helmet's filters, it was flat, tinny and neutral. It could have belonged to anything. Or any sex.

After carefully sealing his ship, the bounty hunter swiftly left the port, heading for the walled fortress that served as Jabba's headquarters on Arba-3. Everyone knew why Fett sought the Hut, and what he was carrying. It was common knowledge that the hunter had been after Han Solo; simple logic dictated the conclusion that Fett would not be looking for Jabba if he had not been successful.

A few ruefully shook their heads — Solo was such an engaging rogue — but no one intended going up against Boba Fett on the Corellian's behalf.

Better him than them.

The whole port area was abuzz with the news. Nobody could quite figure out what had happened, but it was certainly the topic of the week. Seemed Jabba must have tried some fancy footwork on Fett. A stupid move. When the smoke had cleared, Jabba and his four top henchmen were in tiny pieces. Never one to waste an opportunity, Marla T'bat, head of Jabba's Spiral Sector operations, had grabbed the reins. After three vocal dissenters found themselves wondering where certain vital parts of their anatomy had gone, protest had died



swiftly. The first thing T'bat did was to announce, in no uncertain terms, that she was not about to pay so much as a half-credit for some worthless Corellian. Solo's quarrel had been with Jabba, not her.

There was much head-shaking over the situation. It never made sense to stiff a bounty-hunter; you never knew when you might need him/her/it again. But to stiff Boba Fett...no one was that big!

Many of the listeners privately decided to stay out of Fett's way. He had to be in a foul mood: after spending so much time and effort on Solo, he had shot the buyer. A few wondered what would happen to the Corellian now.

One person in particular listened carefully. A slim, dark-haired woman, she sat with two companions in a shadowed corner of a smoke-filled cantina. She had come to Arba-3 on a mission, to keep busy, to keep from thinking about— She had never dreamed that Jabba was here. Chewie, Lando and Luke had all said that Jabba would be on Tatooine. However it had come about, there was no way she was going to let this opportunity pass. Fett would want to cut his losses; she intended to make sure he knew that the Alliance was willing to pay well for Han Solo. She would have to see to it that members of the local cell stayed alert for chances to contact the bounty hunter.

The thought that Fett might, in his anger, merely space his frozen cargo left her nearly frantic.



The armored figure stood alone, near his ship, carefully avoided by the many people crossing, or working in, the landing area. If his reputation had needed any boosting, his decimation of both Jabba and the Hut's upper management had certainly accomplished that. He would have all the breathing room he needed.

In actual fact, an AT-AT could have stomped by and he would not have noticed, so deep in thought was he. The Alliance. He had to find a way to contact the Alliance.

A flash of white suddenly caught his eye and he whirled. An Imperial major stood before him, flanked by four stormtroopers. He remained wary; the Empire often used bounty hunters, but it did not care for them. Distaste was clearly visible on the major's face.

"Hunter," the voice was contemptuous, "the Commander wishes to discuss a matter with you. If you will accompany me?"

It was halfway between a request and a command. Shrugging, the bounty hunter fell in alongside the major, two 'troopers in front, two behind. Curious eyes watched them leave, but no one asked any questions.



A short while later, the bounty stood before the base commander, a stocky man in his fifties, with greying hair and sharp eyes. The Imperial's offer of beverages and a seat was refused.

"Fett, you have quite a reputation—"

The hunter acknowledged the compliment with a nod.

"—and it occurs to me that we might help each other."

"How?" The tinny sound carried no emotion. Not even curiosity.

"Right now, you have a worthless cargo. Your buyer is...dead; the Empire is uninterested. And we would be most unhappy if you were to deal with the rebels — unless it's part of an arrangement with us."

"Arrangement?" The figure did not stir.

"Indeed, Fett. A way to get paid by both sides, without angering the Empire. Are you interested?"

For a reply, the bounty hunter took the seat that had been offered to him earlier.

"The Alliance wants Solo back. Especially, I have been led to understand, the Princess Organa. And she will deal for him. The Empire, on the other hand, wants the Princess — badly. And we'll deal with you for her."

"We want you to use the Corellian to get the Princess. Bait, as it were, since Solo isn't exactly in any 'condition' to give us any trouble. He is still alive, I presume? They may insist on proof before the Princess will actually meet with you."

The helmet nodded. "What makes you think," its owner asked, "that word will reach her?"

"It does not have very far to go, Hunter. One of our agents has gotten word to us that she's here on Arba-3."

The bounty hunter seemed to consider this. "Are you sure he can be trusted?"

"Yes," the Imperial replied. "Unfortunately, he's only on the fringe of the rebel cell here. That's why he can't tell us where she is precisely, though he knows she is here. And that's why we need you. We have no objection to your keeping whatever sum she pays you for Solo, so long as you turn her over to us."

"As a charitable gesture, no doubt." The mechanical voice remained flat, though the words dripped sarcasm.

"Hardly," the commander said dryly. "Would 50,000 credits appear a sufficient recompense for your efforts?"

The hunter stood up. It had been a rhetorical question; the Imperial had had no doubt that the figure would be accepted.

"You will have her, Commander, as soon as I do."

The commander watched the door close behind his visitor. He disliked bounty hunters in general, but this one especially. In a burst of honesty, he admitted he was afraid of Fett. That damned mask. There was no way of telling what the hunter was thinking. It made him somehow inhuman, menacing.

Shaking himself, he reached for the intercom. "Lieutenant, have Fett followed. Cautiously. I want to be ready when this meeting comes off."

Unfortunately, Hunter, he thought smugly, Palpatine does not believe in paying for something he can take

for free.



Leia sat alone in the small, darkened room, staring out the window at the three silver moons, her fingers absentmindedly tapping a tattoo on the desk before her. Craydon had met with the bounty hunter today and reported that while Fett seemed willing to deal, he would do so only with her.

How had he known she was here? Why had he refused to let Craydon see Han? A part of her mind screamed 'trap!', but if there was the slightest chance of getting Han back...

Abruptly, she stood up. She would have to take the risk. If she did not, Fett might hurt Han in some way. If Han were still alive.

And if he were not, Fett would not be leaving Arba-3, either.

Not alive, anyway.



She scanned the crowd carefully. As had been agreed, her escorts waited outside. Though outwardly calm, she could feel knots of tension tying up her stomach. So close. She could almost feel Han beside her. And only a short time ago, she had feared him lost forever.

There. At the corner table. She felt anger at the sight of the armored figure who was intimately tied to her pain — and Han's. She would never forget the agony on Han's face, frozen for all time. But she had been raised from birth to control her emotions, to deal and negotiate with people she might not particularly like for the benefit of others.

And for this special 'other', she would deal with the Emperor himself.

Stopping before the table at which he sat, she faced him coolly. He gestured toward an empty chair and she sat down. For a moment, they eyed each other warily, then she leaned forward.

"Let's not waste each other's time. We both know why we're here. You have something I want, and I have something you want." Her face hardened. "But there will be no negotiations until I see Han Solo and make sure he's still alive."

"Fine," the bounty hunter replied without hesitation. Standing up, he gestured toward the door. "We have to go to my ship."

"Agreed." She stood up as well. "But my people will follow."

He did not reply, but headed swiftly for the exit. She was forced to race to keep up with him. As they moved along the shadowed street, her people following a short distance behind, Leia could not shake the feeling that they were being watched. Trap. The word echoed again in her mind. She glanced over at her companion. The helmet masked his face, but she could swear he seemed tense.

Interesting. It began to look as if he were as con-

cerned about possible Imperial intervention as she was. If he was dealing with the Empire, he still retained a healthy dose of distrust.

They stopped next to his ship, and he slapped at a small opaque glass circle on the outer hull. Silently, the ramp slid open. She was standing there, debating with herself whether or not she should enter the ship, when her internal alarm system suddenly went crazy. The Rebellion had honed instincts she had never realized she had. Now, they warned her that there was danger out there in the shadows.

Her companion's instincts were even sharper. Even as the klaxons went off in her head, he was whirling around, kicking the safety off his rifle with his thumb. Almost simultaneously, the landing erupted with laser fire. She realized her people were engaging the Imperials, who were between her and the rebels. Several stormtroopers broke off and headed toward the two of them, but they were quickly felled.

Leia was completely cut off from her people. Swiftly making her decision, she shouted across the docking bay. "Craydon, it's no use; you can't reach me. Pull out."

She started to turn, searching for an exit, when the bounty hunter suddenly grabbed her around the waist, lifted her up and literally threw her into his ship. Charging up after her, he hit the inner ramp control, sealing the doorway. Before she could get to her feet, he was at the controls, blasting the Slave 1 off-planet.

There was little point in ordering him to stop; they could not go back. Probably would be a ship after them as well. But she carefully cocked her weapon. Things had gone fast out there; she intended to remain in control now.

There was the usual blaze of glorious light as the ship entered hyperspace. Its pilot gave what sounded suspiciously like a relieved sigh, then he rose and turned to find himself facing the business end of the Princess' blaster. He raised both hands to show they were empty.

She nodded an acknowledgment but did not lower her gun. "We can still deal, Hunter. While I can't say much for your choice of partners, I think you've seen their true intentions by now. They won't pay you a quardit.* Not if they can get what they want for free. The Alliance will keep its side of any agreement I make with you."

Her eyes hardened and she tightened her grip on her blaster. "But first, Han Solo. The negotiations end right here — and so do you — if I don't get to see him. Now."

"That's easy enough to arrange," he replied. With a swift movement, he reached up and jerked off his helmet.



Han Solo stood there, grinning at her.

Stunned, she stood, frozen, staring at him. "Han?" she whispered desperately. "Han?"

*quarter-credit

"In the flesh, sweetheart," he replied laughing. Starting to move forward, he suddenly realized he was in serious trouble. The disbelieving look on her face was rapidly giving way to thunderclouds, and the deep brown eyes were shooting sparks.

"WHAT? You've been healthy, unfrozen and behind that damn mask this past week, and you kept it a secret? While I worried myself sick? I'm going to have your head!"

He jumped sideways, barely dodging a mug thrown with notable accuracy. "But, Leia—"

"Don't 'but, Leia' me! You no-good, rotten...nerf-herder' was too good for you!"

In rapid succession, three hologram cubes came flying at him, followed by two hand-sized communication devices and a small set of rifle scopes — all she could find on a wall shelf.

Catching his breath, he realized the barrage had stopped, while she searched for something else to throw. In true Corellian fashion, he took advantage of the momentary lull to hurl himself forward and grab her. Pulling her toward him, he kissed her determinedly. For a moment there was angry resistance, then he found his embrace being returned with equal fervor. After they broke apart, she buried her face against his shoulder and curled one arm tightly around his neck. He heard a muffled sound that, for an instance, he thought was laughter. Then he realized he was wrong.

She was crying.

He had thought that he could never hurt again as much as Vader's toy had hurt him. Another mistake. He felt as if every muffled sob would rip him apart.

Still holding her off the ground, he gently patted her back. "Leia, please don't. I'm sorry, sweetheart. I'm sorry."

Dipping suddenly, he slipped one arm under her knees and, cradling her in his arms, carried her to the nearest seat. He sat down, holding her across his lap, her face still against his shoulder, and rocked her back and forth, stroking her hair and waiting for the storm to abate.

She visibly brought her emotions under control and sat up. "Why? Why did you keep it a secret?" she asked plaintively.

He sighed. "I am sorry, babe, but I couldn't think of anything else to do at the time. Seems the ship had a stabilizer problem and Fett set down on some out-of-the-way planet. While he was working on the ship — if that's what you could call the way he was hacking at the poor thing — I woke up and found myself free. The carbonite case had split open and the carbon-freeze — well, I'd melted!"

"Lando," commented Leia. "He'd set the controls to do that."

"Really?" He was surprised. "Well, I'll have to remember to thank him. After I beat the shit out of him. Anyway," he continued, "I raided his weapons store and went outside. We saw each other at about the same time; I was faster."

He grinned. "Hell, I was lucky."

She shuddered. "Why didn't you just take the Slave I, without the disguise?"

"I needed it. First, I didn't know where you had gone. I assumed the ships wouldn't still be at the rendezvous point. Jabba was after me, and I wasn't sure that the Empire had lost interest. So, I decided to keep the outfit. Then the idea occurred to me to use it to eliminate the Jabba problem once and for all."

"I hear you did that rather efficiently," she commented.

"I try my humble best. My little meeting with the Hut left Marla in control. She and I have always gotten along pretty well," he explained.

"I'll bet," Leia said dryly.

He grinned. "You didn't think you were getting a virgin, did you?"

"Only," she purred sweetly, "if you thought you were."

His grin widened. "I certainly hope not. Innocence can be so boring. Now, will you let me finish?"

"Uh huh."

"Good. Well, there I was, trying to figure out a way to contact a rebel cell — without drawing too much attention — when the Imperial base commander contacts me with a proposition: I should use me to get you! Perfect. I could operate without Imperial interference, though I knew they didn't intend to keep their bargain. I'm afraid the cover of some of your—" he stopped for a moment, then smiled and tapped the tip of her nose with one finger, "our people may have been blown."

"Don't worry," she replied, looking very pleased at his amendment. "We were already planning to close up shop. There are some talented people there, but this planet is too small and out of the way to enable them to use their abilities to their fullest." She stretched contentedly and snuggled in against his shoulder. "You'd better drop us out of hyperspace and set a course for Paltona."

"Paltona? You people really know how to pick the garden spots of the galaxy."

"That's why we like them." She slid off his lap. "While you're changing our course, I'll see if there's anything edible in the galley."

Moving behind him, she leaned forward and whispered conspiratorially into his ear. "If you're a really good boy, I'll let you see my holographic etchings."

He began to laugh. "You certainly know the way to my manners!"

He listened to her footsteps disappearing down the hallway, then leaned forward and flicked the navicomputer on. Not that he couldn't find Paltona easily enough. He could.

The trick was finding the longest route there.



Son of a Sith

Mary Otten Michele Rosenberg

(to "The Imperial March" by John Williams)

Darth Vader's mother wears army boots;
She always wears them with sequinned suits.
Darth Vader can't stand his mother wearing army boots,
That's why he ran away from home!

Darth Vader's father wears pantyhose;
When he does, pulls it up to his nose.
Darth Vader can't stand his father wearing pantyhose,
That's why he ran away from home!

Darth Vader's sister works on the strip,
And she gets only five bucks a clip.
Darth Vader can't stand his sister working on the strip,
That's why he ran away from home!

Darth Vader's Uncle Ben isn't clean.
Lives with Jawas on dry Tatooine.
Darth Vader can't stand his Uncle Ben shov'ling bantha chips,
That's why he ran away from home!

Darth Vader's Auntie Em raises Womps.
Has a round-up each year to the swamps.
Darth Vader can't stand his Auntie Em raising all the womps,
That's why he ran away from home!

Darth Vader's son Skywalker's a wimp,
Dropped-out Jedi, a hick and a shrimp.
Darth Vader can't stand his son Luke being such a wimp,
That's why he tried to have him canned...
Vader wants to stop his fam'ly once and for all,
And he is starting with the hand!

Leah Rosenthal

OUT LOOKING FOR LUKE

NIKKI CADWELL & GATONPAULIS

(to "Winter" by John Denver)

It's cold, and it's getting colder.
It's grey and white and winter all around.
Oh, I must be getting older!
All this snow is tryin' to get me down!

There's a tauntaun underneath me
Slowing dyin' away.
Sometimes I just don't feel like goin' on any more!
Yet I know it's more than worth
The wastin' away
For a chance to see Luke's face in the mornin' sun.
Hey, kid! Talk to me!

It's night, and it's getting colder.
The base is out of contact, far away.
Oh, I was crazy to be bolder
Than all those rebel flyboys who had stayed.

There's a tauntaun's carcass lyin' in
The cold snow on Hoth.
I'm wonderin' if we'll ever see the base any more.
The kid's a frozen hunk of meat;
Will he ever thaw?
Or will there be two bodies in the morning sun?
Live, kid! Make it for me!

There's a rogue ship flyin' at me,
Slowly comin' my way.
I'm wonderin' if he'll hear my distress call, very soon.
"Good mornin'!" I call out to him.
Hey Luke, kid — we're saved.
We'll get you back to your warm little room.
Kid, that's two you owe me.

There's a tauntaun underneath me
Slowing dyin' away.
Sometimes I just don't feel like goin' on any more!
Yet I know it's more than worth
The wastin' away
For a chance to see Luke's face in the mornin' sun.
Hey, kid! Talk to me!

A Very Short **STAR WARS™** *Story*

Marcia Brin

Han Solo settled carefully into one of the chairs in the small cooking area, one of several scattered around the outlying reaches of the base for those who were unable to make it to the main dining area. It had been over a month now, and Jabba's tender loving care was fading into a distant memory, but he still avoided any sudden moves. Still, Doc had promised that in another couple of weeks he'd be as good as new.

Actually, except for a twinge now and then, life was pretty damn good. If someone had told him a year ago that he would find everything — and everyone — that he had without realizing it been searching for, he would have laughed him out of the cantina. It had taken his whole life, but he had finally come home.

And, in the end, it all focused on one person, one tiny, dynamic, wonderful person, who held his newly-found contentment in one slim hand, and treated it with all the love and gentleness its fragility required. He knew, thinking about her, that he had a damn, sappy smile on his face, but he didn't care.

Not everything had changed, of course. His sarcastic sense of humor, matched by her own, occasionally reared its wicked head. Then, they would engage in a top-this-zinger contest that would leave them both laughing — and outsiders wondering if the two of them had all their cogs and wheels. Certain areas were taboo: he, for example, would never dream of making a crack about Alderaan; he had soothed too many nightmares. But everything else was fair game, including his ship — and her height.

He grinned. Now there was a never-ending source of material. Leia, of course, refused to admit she was short. Petite she accepted, but he had pointed out that if she

were any less 'petite', she wouldn't be able to sit up. He had beaten a hasty retreat before she had figured out whether that had been a compliment or an insult.

It did not really bother her, though; if he thought it did, he would have wrecked the Falcon before mentioning it. But Leia played the game zestfully, once pummeling him mercilessly with the nearest object at hand — a killer pillow — while expressing her opinion of his 'height' jokes. "But Leia," he had protested, "I never make height jokes. Only lack of height jokes."



A shadow flickered beside him, interrupting his reverie. Luke sank into a nearby chair, followed almost immediately by the object of Han's affections. Leia looked perfect, but then she would look perfect to him in a burlap sack. She smiled warmly at Luke and then moved behind Han and dropped a light kiss on the top of his head, brushing his cheek gently with her fingers.

"Anything edible?" she asked, as she opened the cooler door. She pulled out a small container and peered inside. "Looks terrible. Any idea what it is?"

Both men shook their heads.

"Well, you only live once." She dumped the strange-looking mixture onto a small plate. "It can't make me feel any worse than this morning's meeting. That damn Klaxer! I could strangle that man. Pompous, conceited, stubborn—"

"You shouldn't hold it against him; everybody has a few failings," Luke laughed.

"Not Leia," Han announced.

Leia sighed, and conspicuously picked up the now-empty container and began to flip it in her hand.

Luke shook his head, but played his part. "Come on, Han. Everybody."

"Nope," Han replied firmly, "not Leia."

Her lips twitched, but she seemed to ignore him and just flipped the container while waiting for the other shoe to drop.

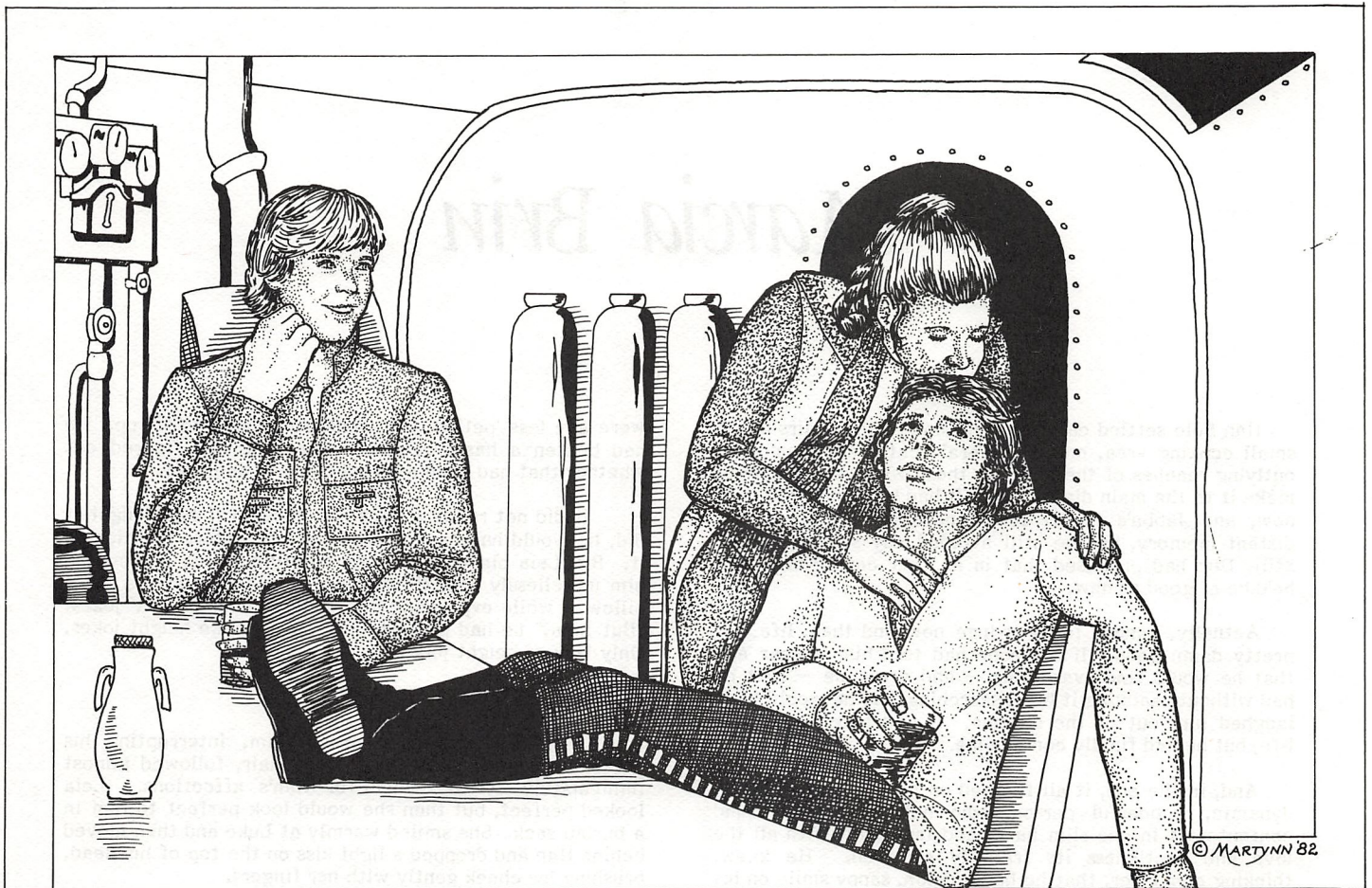
Luke continued, as ever the straight man. "Han, you can't be serious."

The Corellian rose, stretched and began to head casually for the door. "Of course I am, Luke. Other people have failings."

There was a pause.

"Leia has shortcomings."

He barely beat the container to the door.



Till the Morrow Comes

(to "Greensleeves/What Child is This?"
traditional)

What child is this who rests his head
Upon a hard, cold pallet;
This sleeping boy who flies a ship
Into the heart of battle?
Not boy, but man is he
Who flirts with death, and holds my heart.
Sleep, Luke; the morrow comes
So soon, and brings with it parting.

So innocent is he in repose;
How could he know of evil?
But pain and treachery he has known,
And with death well acquainted.
Dream free, my farmboy love,
Our pilot brave, fair Jedi knight.
Sleep Luke; the morrow comes
So soon, and brings with it parting.

Let nothing taint your purity
Nor blackness touch your shining soul.
I pray you stand tall among all men.
Be our brave, gallant rebel.
Wait, sun; don't break the dawn.
Please let him stay with me longer.
Sleep, Luke; the morrow comes
So soon, and brings with it parting.

Gatonpaulis

The Fall of the Jedi

Jani Hicks

(to "Che" by Judy Collins)

One morning on fair Alderaan the leader of the Jedi there
And two of his companions
Were forced to flee the enclave for their lives.
Through green and golden countryside they sped along the little roads;
The people smiled and shouted as they hurried by.
A youth called out to everyone, "Don't think that we are leaving;
The Empire tries to frighten you with us.
We shall return...."

CHORUS I: Continue with the work,
Don't listen to their lies.
You have it in your hands;
If you arise, the Empire dies.

A tall black figure walked among the bodies to the entryway.
He stood and looked out on the enclave before him.
Skywalker's burnt body was in the craft
That they blew up before it reached the port.
The black knight towered above him
Or what there was remaining of him in the afternoon.

(CHORUS I)

CHORUS II: There is no one who can show you
The road you should be on.
Though we can tell you, we can't show you.
Who knows, tomorrow we are gone.

The smell of oil and incense fills the room out back of Anchorhead
While on the table lies a frightened, crying child.
His eyes are round and blue, his hair is long and pale.
He's weeping for his mother in the evening light,
People who are neighbors — those who knew her, those who killed her—
Stand outside the door; their hands are restless and empty.
They watch her father standing silent over where she lies
And beg the Force inside themselves for the young boy.

CHORUS I & II

BEGINNINGS

SUE BURSZTYNSKI

He stood waiting, leaning against a stunted tree. Soon she would be here. He laughed softly. What better test of his newly-found power? The old man was a fool, teaching that it must be used only for what he termed good. Power was power, a neutral thing, to be wielded by its possessor as he saw fit. He, who had begun on a farm, would rule an empire yet and be damned to the Jedi dogooders. The Republic was in its death throes and rightly so; now was the time to offer one's services to the right man and be on the right side.

She came walking across the barren ground toward him, from her landspeeder, hypnotized. A pretty thing, hardly worth his notice, but there had been a time when he had wanted her and, before leaving this godforsaken planet, he would celebrate his new power by taking what he wanted. Afterward, she could go back to her dull, stolid parents, for all he cared, and live out her life on the dryness they called a farm; he had no further interest in her.

She was tiny against his huge frame. That was hardly surprising; he was the tallest man in this area of Tatooine.

Without recognition, she looked up into the ruggedly-handsome face that would one day be a scarred horror covered by a breathing mask.

"Come," he said, and led her into the coolness of the rock shelter nearby.



The old man sat in deep contemplation in his cave. It was an ugly thing his pupil had done, but he had gone from the straight path and was now beyond recall. Not for some time would young Vader know what he had started and by then, Kenobi thought, fortunately it would be too late.

Kenobi thought of the girl and, in pity, reached out to her mind; she would now believe that her encounter had been with her sweetheart, his other apprentice, Arieh Skywalker, who would, alas, be gone soon in any case.

His mind turned once more to the matter at hand. It was hard to believe that good would come of evil, yet wasn't it said that Merlin the wise and good had been sired by the Devil? Had not the great Arthur been conceived under circumstances of treachery, deceit and murder?

The boy would be brought up well enough by his kindly, unimaginative relatives until the time came for his training. It would be a difficult road for him, but perhaps — just perhaps — he would restore the balance his father had upset.

The old man concentrated, but even he, in his wisdom, could not see that far ahead. Great events were about to take place, but their outcome would depend on the decisions of men, and what would be would be.

He rose and carefully laid away the light-sabre that had been abandoned by its owner when he had stormed out after the final quarrel. Kenobi smiled slightly; it would be used when the time came. Of that he was certain.

ENTERPRISE MARCH

Come seek the future with me
As we chart the vast and starry sea.
Out to the stars we are bound,
Where unexplored wonders wait to be found.

Break free and we shall see
What the stars hold for you and me,
Where tomorrow is as near or far
As the light of the brightest star.

Out in the stars you are free
To search for tomorrow's promise with me.
Onward we go, starward bound,
Wherever a brave new world is found.

No matter how far we may roam,
The light of Polaris beckons us home.
The future waits on some far shore
Where no other men have gone before.

Voyage to the farthest star,
There no star chart shows where we are.
Lost out in the endless deep,
We'll have the stars' secrets to keep.

Fate will lead me where you are,
For we share the same guiding star.
Out in the space where we roam
Is the place we both call home.

CHARLA MENKE

MIDTERM

Marcia Brin

The small, gnomelike figure paced steadily in front of the tiny dwelling. Back and forth. Endlessly. His cane tapped out a steady rhythm. Every now and then, a loud "hmpf" could be heard.

He continued his march until a soft sound that might have been the whisper of the wind through the jungle but sounded rather more like a sigh — though there was no one else in sight — reached him.

"Yes, yes, know you are there I do, Obi-wan," the small figure said to no one in particular. "Worse. All worse it is. Told you I did."

The sigh sounded again. "He will keep his word. He will be back."

"Hah! Want him, do I? Never listens, that one. Never learns. No faith in the Force. Inside, he does not believe."

"It was not an easy decision, Master."

"Easy? Easy? When have Jedi ever had easy decisions? Never has anything been black and white. Always, always the ripples in the pond must be considered."

Yoda stopped and tapped his cane. "Yes, not an

easy decision — but the easy way he took. The easy answer."

"His friends. They are his friends."

"So?" The cane jabbed angrily at the air as its owner glared at empty space. "So? More important, are they, than everything? Never be a Jedi will he. Discipline, sacrifice, self-control, a larger view of things, obedience to superiors — these a Jedi has."

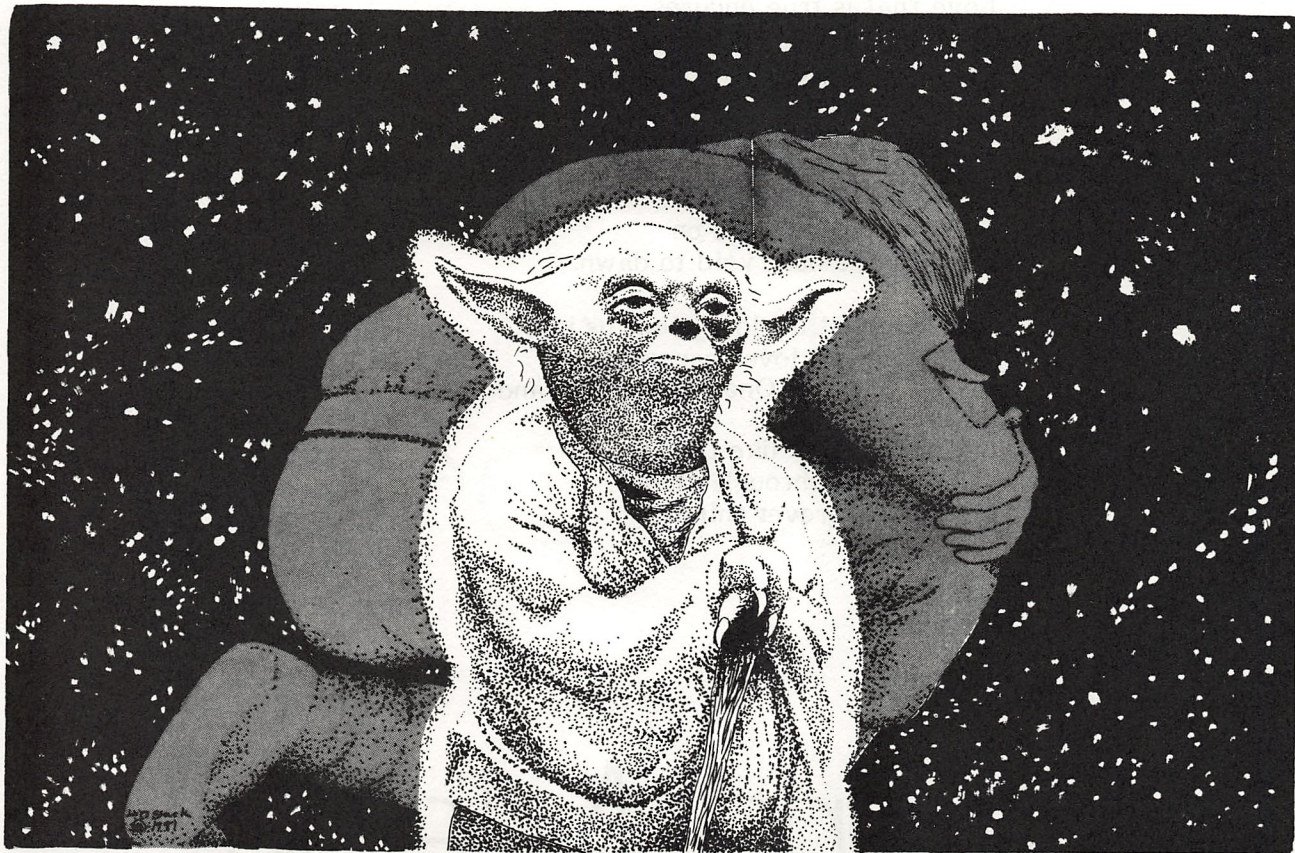
Yoda sighed, looking suddenly old and frail. "Easy? No. But right, Obi-wan. The other choice was the right one. Always he thinks of what he wants, always he thinks of the moment; never the future, never the galaxy. Think you future generations will thank him? Three lives against — how many? His heart may be good, but his head a Jedi must use. He must make the hard choice."

"You will see, old friend: in the end, he will not fail the test."

"Obi-wan, this was the test."

Yoda gazed sadly into the distance.

"He has already failed it."



ILIAS THEME

Can you see out in space
Your star and mine
Traveling throughout all time?

I shall live for your smile,
Hang on your sighs,
Charting the stars in your eyes.

We must go on fearlessly
When love is brave and free
To live life as it's meant to be.

Can you see in my eyes
All that is yours?
Love that is true endures.

Let me voyage with you,
Let me be where you are.
You are my guiding star.

And together, my love,
We'll sail on and on
Through the dark void to dawn.

We must let love steer us into,
Let love sear us into
One long, bright and blinding light.

Let our love be like the stars
Burning through time,
Love that forever shines.

Charla Menke

THE LESSON

Anne Elizabeth Zeek

He awoke with a start, the cessation of pain as sharp to his heightened senses as the Inquisitor's Rod would have been just days — hours? — earlier. Pain, and only pain, had been his constant companion for as long as he remembered; in those first few minutes, pain was all he remembered. Pain that burned along every nerve ending; pain that chilled so cold it burned him yet again.

Pain. And then, as in a dream, a woman's face: mask-still, mouth set against the plea that would buy him no surcease. In her eyes, tears. Tears for him. He reached, groped for the name that would not come. She meant more to him than life. Why, then, could he not remember her name?

Pushing himself upright, he swung his feet over the side of the narrow bunk, then stood on shaky legs. Her name, and his. He could not even remember that. Only pain, and her face.

He glanced around, examined his prison. Light, almost blinding in intensity, filled the room from an indirect and unseen source to bounce off white walls of extruded plastisteel. He turned slowly, eyes narrowed as he studied the unbroken walls. He could see neither chink nor crack, no difference from one surface to the other save the slab on which he had been sleeping. The walls of the room met ceiling and floor smoothly, with rounded corners, and there was no indication of the location of the door. The vibration felt through the floor told him he was aboard a ship. Draw that slab back into the wall, turn off ship's gravity, and he'd get hopelessly turned about, unable even to recognize up or down.

He paced the small, square cell, his sense of frus-

trated impotence increasing every second. Confinement tormented him, and he directed his thoughts to escape. There had to be a way out of his trap. Too many people were depending on him; he couldn't stay prisoner. Dimly, like holos faded from overuse, images danced on the edge of his consciousness. He almost saw them, the ones who depended on him, almost could name them. Then the shadowed figures flickered and were gone.

Concern for those unknown ones, for his friends, rasped at his mind, and pain welled up within him in reaction. He bit his lips over the fire spreading once more along his arms and legs, filling his belly and his chest, trickling along his spinal cord. He took a deep breath, forced the pain to recede from memory, and sought escape.

He felt his way around the room again, fingers splayed to pick up the slightest variance in texture or surface. Nothing. Desperately searching for some way out of the cell, he lost count of the number of times he went over the same spot.

He stopped in front of a wall that seemed no different than the others and reared his head back, instinctively flaring his nostrils as at the scent of the hunt. He almost gagged at the odor of arrogant indifference that seeped through him.

Unhesitatingly, he identified it with the being responsible for his imprisonment, for his pain. Outraged pride and fury burned through him, and he flung himself on the gleaming wall, battering against it until it was splattered with blood from his bruised hands. Exhausted, he slid down the wall to lie in a huddled heap on the floor.

He was too damned weak. He needed Chewbacca. Using the wall to prop himself, he sat up. Chewbacca! A name! The image of a russet and brown wookiee flashed into his mind. A name, and a face to attach it to. With a rush, the memories suppressed by his pain flooded back.

Chewbacca and the princess, his princess, had been prisoners of Darth Vader. Had the Dark Lord kept his tacit promise to free them?

As though called up by his chaotic thoughts, a woman's scream of agony tore through the small cell. He pushed himself to his feet. "Leia? Leia!! Where are you?!!!" He looked around helplessly.

The roar of an enraged wookiee assaulted his ears. Han staggered from one end of the cell to the other, pounding fitfully on each wall in turn. "Chewie, hold on, I'll find you!"

Leia screamed again, and this time there was an added counterpoint to her pain. A young voice, male: "Han, hear me. Help me, Han, help me."

Han stared around wildly. Luke. Where were his friends? The screams came more frequently: cries for help from Luke and Leia, growls of entreaty from Chewbacca.

Han staggered to the middle of the room. His impotent fury, finding no target, turned on itself; he rubbed his temples in a vain attempt to control his headache.

"Damn you, Jabba! You have me, what else do you want? How did you get my friends away from Lando?"

The room hummed, and in the sound Han heard a faraway laugh. Dragging his palm across desperately dry lips, he said, "Jabba? Is it your blood money? Is that what you want?" He turned slowly, trying to sense once more the waiting, watching presence. "You won't get any money at all if I'm in here, Jabba, now will you?" The presence withdrew. Han paced the room, casting once more for the scent. "So help me gods, you harm one hair on any of their heads and I'll—"

"You'll what, Captain Solo? Draw on me? Again? With what? This blaster?"

A familiar shape materialized in front of him. He grabbed the weapon, checked it. A full charge. Spinning, he fired at the far wall. The white plastisteel glowed as it absorbed the full force of Han's lethal beam.

Han let his arm drop to his side. His captor's voice and words penetrated; bitterly, Han whispered, "Vader."

The wall cracked down the middle, slid open. Han faced a strange, pod-like machine. Within, the Sith Lord sat in brooding silence. Han stalked forward and the wall slid shut behind him. "What have you done to my friends?"

"I?" Vader sounded amused, at ease. "Nothing, I assure you, Captain. They are safely aboard and will stay here — safely — so long as you co-operate with me."

Han's finger curled around the trigger of his blaster. He ached with the need to fire the weapon full-blast at Vader, the need to see if the Dark Lord could twice evade death at his hands. He could not fire. Not now, when

Vader would expect such a move. "Since when does the Sith make deals with a smuggler?" Determined not to give any advantage to his captor, he used as arrogant a tone as he dared.

Vader ignored his defiance. "Since that smuggler can serve me in the Force."

Han stared at the Imperial Warlord speechlessly, and wondered why he'd never heard any rumors that the Lord Vader was insane. He shoved his blaster into his belt and, hoping it would remain closed, leaned against the wall he had just come through. "The Force? Me? Right. You got the wrong Jedi, Vader."

Vader clenched his right fist, and Han felt a constriction in his throat. "Do not think you can trifle with me, fool," said the Dark Lord. "I know the smell of power." There was a pause, and the bonds around Han's throat loosened. "You are useful to me, but not essential, so do not think it."

"Listen, Your Lordship," Han croaked, "I don't believe in that Force crap. I leave that stuff for mystics and for fools." He drew strength from the seeming solidity of the wall and straightened.

"And for rebels like your friend Skywalker?" The Sith waved his hand, and the area behind his pod lit, revealing a massive viewscreen. An image wavered on that screen. Luke Skywalker, sun-bleached hair slicked and dark with sweat, tossed restlessly on a sickbay diagnostic bed and cried out in sleep. Han could not hear his friend's words, but sensed he was calling for him, for his help.

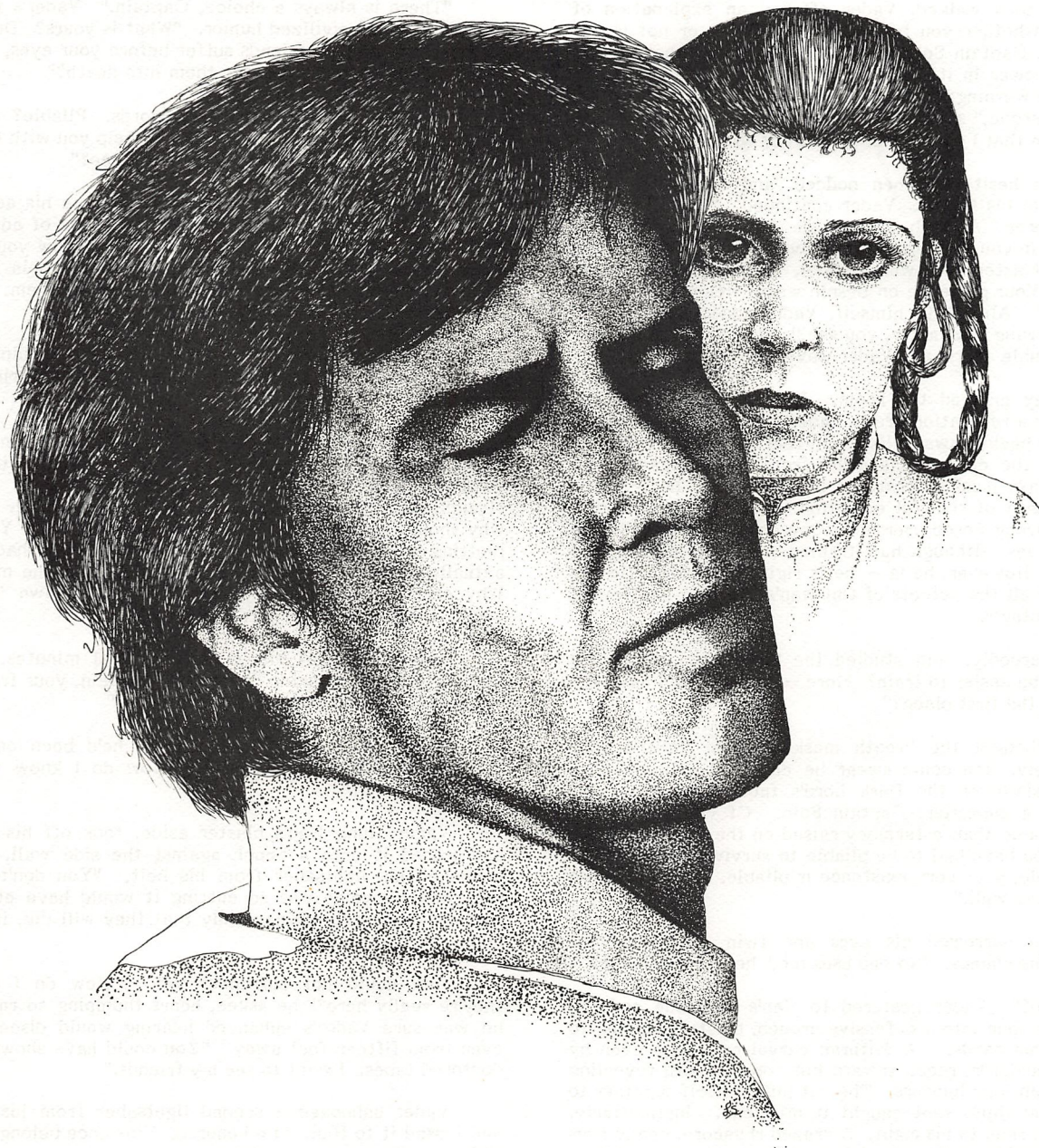
Negligently, Vader flicked his black-gloved hand and Luke's picture faded, to be replaced by the image of a cell. Han started forward. Leia! With Chewbacca — and Lando Calrissian — at her side. Han clenched his hands tightly over his belt. He had told the wookiee to protect Leia; why were they both here, prisoners for Evil alone knew what purpose, along with his 'friend', Calrissian?

The viewscreen blanked. "It was easy to capture them," Vader said, and Han fed his fury on the Dark Lord's gloating pride. "They stormed Jabba's stronghold seeking you, and found me instead." Vader rose from the pod, looked down at Han. "I have not yet examined your background, but I will. Somehow, your parents must have escaped the Great Purge." He paused, regarded Han thoughtfully. Han, who did not remember his real parents, eyed Vader noncommittally. Vader waved his words aside. "At this late date, that scarcely matters. What does matter, is that you are here, and have power at your command. I will control that."

Han drew back his head and stared warily at the Dark Lord. "First, I have no power in the Force. I told you, I don't believe that crap. Second, if you've got Luke, why not use him? He's got training and he does believe in the Force. Why drag me into this?"

Vader faced the smuggler directly, and Han felt a strange tickling in his mind, almost as through someone were rooting around in his memories. Han shook his head, dislodged the unwanted visitor. Vader nodded. "Questions are a seeking of the truth. They are worth answers."

He spun, cape billowing with his movement, and stalked to the imposing doors at the far end of the room. He gestured Han to follow. The smuggler paused, then



obeyed. He wanted answers. He could not form any plan without them.

At Vader's command, the doors opened. Han followed the Dark Lord down the narrow grey corridors, noting with amusement that no one made any reaction to the sight of the Dark Lord Vader striding through an Imperial star destroyer with an armed prisoner in tow.

As they walked, Vader offered an explanation of sorts. "Whether you believe in the Force or not is immaterial, Captain Solo. All that matters is that you do possess power in it." Han started to protest, and Vader held up a warning hand. Han felt his shirt collar tighten. "Do not argue," said Vader. "Accept for the sake of this discussion that I am neither insane nor witless."

Han hesitated, then nodded, and eased his collar away from his throat. Vader continued. "I am a Master of the Force. As such, I can sense the Force in others. It is strong in you, stronger than I have felt it in anyone save my old Master, Obi-wan Kenobi, and in young -- Skywalker. Your presence on Bespin was a welcome surprise, Captain." Almost to himself, Vader added, "I thought I was following Skywalker, you see." They reached another set of double doors, and Vader waved them open.

They entered the room. It was huge, cavernous, obviously a recreation area. Vader turned to Han, and the smuggler backed away. He could feel the excitement, the thrill of the chase, emanating from the renegade Jedi. "This galaxy must be restored to order, must be set back on the path of rightful evolution. But to ensure that, I need a strong Force-user under my control. Skywalker is trained, yes, although half-trained would be more nearly correct. However, he is -- he is rigid, unpliable. He has absorbed all the defects of Obi-wan's teaching and few of the advantages."

Guardedly, Han studied the Sith Lord. "And you think I'd be easier to train? More -- pliable? If I have the Force in the first place?"

Although the breath mask covered Vader's face completely, Han could swear he caught a glimpse of a cynical smile on the Dark Lord's face. "More pliable? You are a smuggler, Captain Solo. Of course you are more pliable than a farmboy raised on the outback of the Rim. You have had to be pliable to survive. Your ethics are pliable, your very existence is pliable. You will serve my purpose well."

Han narrowed his eyes and twin spots of color stained his cheeks. "No one uses me," he warned Vader.

"No?" Vader gestured to Han's left side and the smuggler spun into a defensive crouch, blaster seeming to leap to his hands. A Mithran carval-cat, huge even by breed standards, raced toward him, open mouth revealing seven-inch long incisors. The cat pulled itself together to jump, and Han's shot caught it mid-leap. Instinctively, Han then spun to his right. A crazed rhyacorn, beady eyes red-rimmed from the blood-lust of the hunt, charged him. Han burned the beast down in full stride and spun a third time. He hesitated. The room seemed clear of danger. Had Vader called off the testing? A skreeing sound snapped his attention overhead, and Han brought up his weapon to blast two diving vulture-hawks before they could gouge out his eyes.

The Dark Lord's cruel laughter sounded, and Han spun once more. Without thought, he fired at the

Warlord. Vader flung up his hands, deflected the firepower, and called Han's weapon to himself through the Force. "Very good, Captain," he said approvingly. "You acted on instinct, without stopping to think, and almost caught me. I think you will not do so again, if you don't mind?"

Han bowed. "Have I a choice?"

"There is always a choice, Captain." Vader's voice lost its edge of civilized humor. "What is yours? Do you join me? Or do your friends suffer before your eyes, until they plead with you to release them into death?"

Han pondered the Sith Lord's words. Pliable? Yes, he supposed he must be. "If I agree to help you with this -- this scheme of yours, do my friends go free?"

Vader hesitated, and Han pressed home his advantage. Deliberately, he adopted a formal mode of address patterned after Vader's own speech. "You know you will get nowhere with them. Luke is -- unpliable, Leia more so. If your plan succeeds, you have no use for them. And what harm can Lando or Chewbacca do you?"

Vader's voice was wry, amused. "Don't you think the Emperor might have plans for the boy and for the Princess Organa?"

Han nodded, and a rueful smile twisted his mouth into a grimace. "Oh yes, I should think he would -- if you want to give him a tame Jedi of his own." He straightened his shoulders, looked straight at Vader. "But why should you care if the Emperor wants them? You're plotting treason." He held his breath. Vader had not actually admitted to this, but what else could he mean? Why else would he be so desperate for his own 'tame Jedi'? Han was used to hard bargaining.

Vader stared at him silently several minutes. At last he nodded and said, "Very well, Captain, your friends go free the moment you are sworn to me."

Han's mouth was dryer than if he'd been on the D'Velian flatlands for a month. "How do I know you'll keep your word?"

Vader flung Han's blaster aside, took off his cape and tossed it onto a bench against the side wall. He unhooked his lightsaber from his belt. "You don't," he said, and his voice was so cutting it would have etched through durasteel. "Know only that they will die, if you do not co-operate."

Han could not surrender yet. "How do I know they're really here?" he asked, heart thumping so rapidly he was sure Vader's enhanced hearing would discern it even from fifteen feet away. "You could have shown me doctored tapes. I want to see my friends."

Vader unhooked a second lightsaber from his belt and tossed it to Han. "Be honored. This once belonged to Obi-wan. Now it is yours."

The hilt was oddly heavy for its size. "I haven't agreed to this training," Han protested.

Vader activated his saber. A dazzling red beam flared into life. The Dark Lord stalked toward Han. "If you live past the first lesson," he purred, "I might consider your request."

Han backpedaled. Bringing up his saber defensively, he activated the weapon. A white beam of light appeared. Vader pressed the attack, and Han clumsily swung his saber to meet the Dark Lord's advance. There was the crackle of two energy fields meshing, neutralizing one another. As they fought, the white beam emitted by Han's saber gradually shifted through the spectrum until it glowed a deep, brilliant green.

Vader fought one-handedly. Unable to emulate him, Han grasped the wide hilt in both hands. Swordplay had not interested him in years, not since he had earned his mastery as a legata fighter on Corell. He longed for the immediacy of his blaster, but Vader had issued the challenge and had chosen the weapons. Han had no choice but to do his best.

Vader pressed him to the limit, and Han was forced to call up old skills and long-lost habits. Finally, Han realized the Sith Lord had no intention of killing him. Vader was toying with him, trying to find his weakness, trying to catalogue his movements and his responses. Pliable? All right then, if it would buy freedom for his friends, he would be pliable.

Han shifted into another fighting form, favoring his left side over his right, playing a drawing game rather than his usual direct attack. The mock battle continued until Vader drew back and deactivated his lightsaber. Han, trying to move, found himself rooted to the floor.

"Rule number one," Vader said, and sardonic humor was restored to his voice, "the training Master controls the situation."

"I have not accepted the training," Han reminded Vader.

"You will," said the Sith, directing Han to shut off his lightsaber. Han hefted the weapon thoughtfully, then did so. Time enough to press the attack. Time enough later, when Vader would not expect it.

"My friends?" he reminded Vader.

The Dark Lord nodded and led Han from the training arena to the gantry room overlooking an echoing docking hold. The battered, familiar shape of the Millennium Falcon squatted there, surrounded by stormtroopers. Another squad of foot soldiers marched into the docking area, and Han pressed close to the gantry window to look at their prisoner. Leia was thin. Thinner even than when he had last seen her. A livid bruise marred one silky cheek.

Han spun on Vader, reaching automatically for the saber hanging on his belt. A gesture from Vader stopped him. "Do not try my patience too far, Captain. Be satisfied with the victory you have won." The Sith Lord nodded toward Leia. "The Princess Organa is not a — willing prisoner. Any marks she bears cost her captors dearly, I assure you."

Han turned back to the window. Yes, he was sure she had cost her captors dearly, his feisty, scrappy, little love. And damn her, damn him, damn them both. Why had they taken so long to know their hearts? Han took a deep breath. If he agreed to Vader's plan, the princess would be lost to him. If he did not agree, she would die, her beautiful, fiery soul destroyed for Vader's pleasure.

"What do you want, Vader?" The words were stark,

with no attempt at meaningless politeness.

"I want you, Captain. I want you to willingly pledge your obedience and your loyalty to me. I want you as my lieutenant, as my man. I want you at my side when I attack the Emperor."

Han stared down at Leia. Something warned the princess she was being watched. She glanced up, stood as though transfixed. An expression of unbelieving joy lit her face, and she broke out of line. The trooper guarding her grabbed her shoulder, pulled her back. She shook him off, started forward again. Vader's amused words came to Han as an almost ignored background noise.

"The princess, of course, thought you dead in the five months since you were 'lost' on Bespin." The words penetrated and Han stared down at Leia. Five months. Five months they could have been together — if not for Vader's mad scheme. His hand tightened on the hilt of his lightsaber.

"Leia," he whispered, knowing she could not hear.

Leia looked beyond Han and saw Vader. Terror drowned the joy in her eyes. She looked from Vader to Han and back again. Turning icy pale, she shivered as though touched by a freezing wind.

Another squad of troopers marched in leading Chewbacca, Lando Calrissian, and Luke Skywalker. They were so docile, Han knew they must be drugged. Han looked down at his friends, at his love. Bitterly, he nodded. "All right, Vader, I'll take your training, help you defeat the Emperor. Let them go and I — I pledge you my loyalty. For what it's worth."

There was a pause. Han cut a quick glance to Vader. The Dark Lord stared at him. For a second, Han wondered if this were all a cruel hoax. Then Vader nodded and spoke an order into the gantry comm-unit. The prisoners were hustled toward the Falcon.

Leia broke away from the guards again. At a gesture from Vader, Han went to the comm-unit. "Leia, take the Falcon and get out of here. I — I'm staying with Vader." She shook her head. Han saw her lips move and knew she was pleading with him, but the comm-unit did not pick up her words. "Get out of here, Your Worship. I've pledged my word to Vader." That stopped her, and she was quickly surrounded by troopers.

Jaws clenched tightly, Han watched as the terror on Leia's face was replaced by shock, then by sorrow. Han knew she understood his bargain, knew she did not want the sacrifice. She tried to break away once more, tried to run toward the gantry room entrance. The troopers caught her, thrust her on board the Falcon. She and Han exchanged a last, knowing glance before the ship's outer door slid shut. Han folded his arms and clutched his grief to himself, away from the view of the Dark Lord.

The Falcon took off, and Han stared after his lost lady-bird. His mouth tasted of ashes and rue. He clenched his hands on the hilt of Obi-wan's — of his saber. He had sworn his fealty to Darth Vader — and could only hope that the Dark Lord would have the regretting of that service.



Time passed. Han and Vader spent weary hours

bringing the ex-smuggler's power to fruition. Han worried at first whether Vader's teaching was of the Light side or the Dark, only to decide it did not matter. He was lost, and had sold his soul into perdition for the sake of his friends. Light and Dark no longer concerned him.

One goal remained with him, one desire. That Vader would suffer as he had suffered.

It took five years. And during those five years, Han Solo stood at Vader's side and served his Dark Lord well. Five years, during which Han helped crush Leia's rebellion. If Luke or Leia ever understood who it was who destroyed their armies time and time again, he did not know. Vader's forces, Han at the helm, drove the Alliance until it was but a shadowy reflection of the organization that had challenged an Empire.

And then it was Vader's turn to challenge that Empire. The battle blazed across the galaxy, engulfing all in its path. Worlds died, and armies, to satisfy Vader's ambition, and still Han gave his loyalty.

Vader, Han at his side, swept his armies into the Core to take the capital itself and to issue challenge to the Emperor. They fought the final duel in the main throne room on Core Central. It took their combined strength, but they broke the Imperial Force Lord's power and sent his soul into the outer Darkness. Vader's robes of royal scarlet, made long since in anticipation of his

victory, foretold decades past, swept the marble floor as he strode away from the Emperor's body. He climbed the steps of the raised dais leading to the throne. Throwing his head back and lifting high his hands, he laughed exultantly. "At last, we can bring order to the galaxy!"

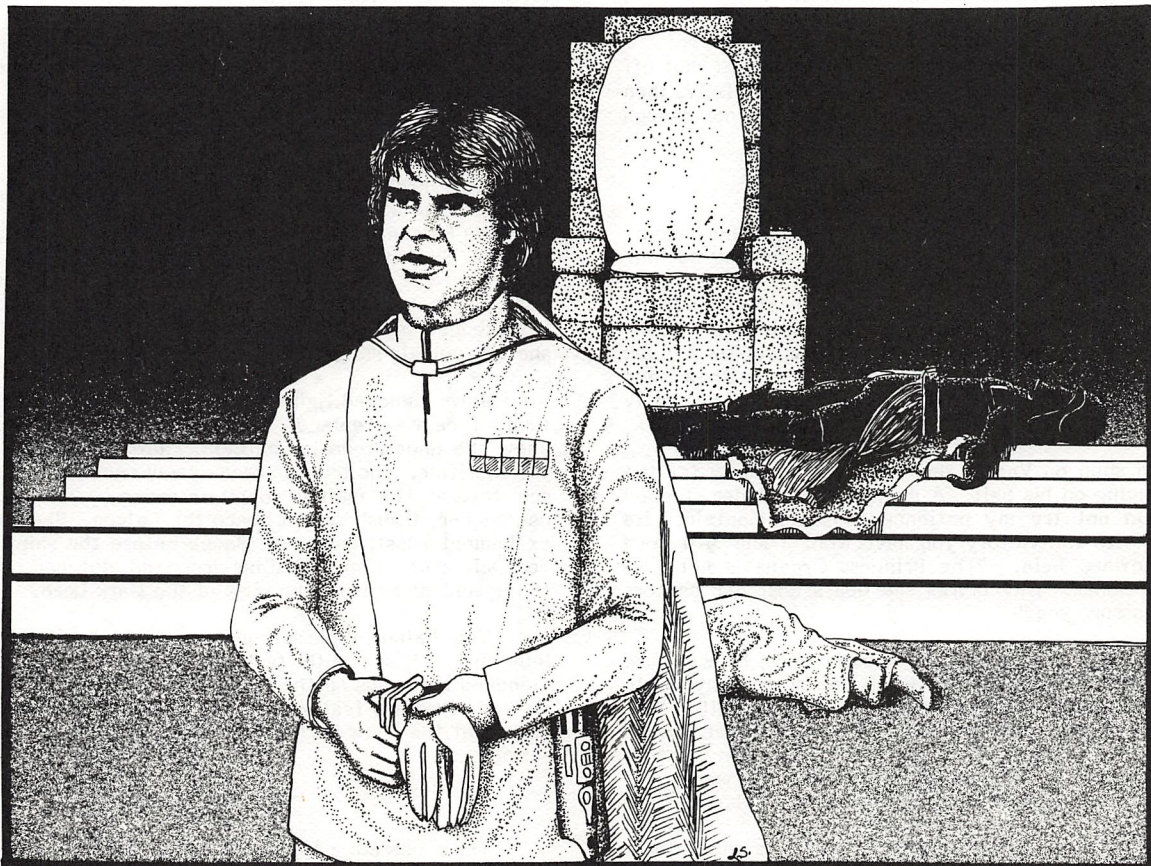
"We?"

Vader spun. He stared down at the Corellian and Han read the shock in him. Han realized then that Vader had depended on the closeness engendered by the Force training to ensure his loyalty. Han smiled grimly. It was too bad Vader had not made more study of Corellians — and Corellian honor. Han had met the letter of his bond when he helped Vader defeat the Emperor. Now it was time to return to older loyalties.

Vader released his breath with a sound like a hiss. "So. Treachery. And from you? I would have named you heir. You could not wait?" Vader activated the blood-red saber and leaped from the dais. Han activated his own saber and the vibrant green beam sprang into existence.

The two Force warriors clashed in battle. Vader pressed the attack, and Han met each move with an easy, casual grace. They disengaged momentarily. "Why, Han? Why now, after all this time?"

Han kicked his black robes out of his way. "Pliability, my Lord. Isn't that why you — 'hired' me?" Vader



attacked once more, and Han met him head on. Spinning, slashing, Han drove Vader to the defensive, the first time in decades Vader was forced to take that position. Then Han paused, pulled back again "I kept my bargain with you," he said. "I did not promise to help you reign, my Lord, only to win the throne. Leia and Luke deserve their chance now."

Vader swung wildly, trying to close in on Han, who eluded him with a quick sideways leap. Shafts of light sputtered and crackled as energy fields met, separated, met again. Vader tried to distract Han by creating Force assassins. Han did not meet them directly; using the powers Vader had force-fed to optimum strength, he met each creature Vader sent against him with its greatest natural enemy. The battle between Master and challenger raged, and as saber met and engaged saber, in the recesses of the throne room, Force-creature met Force-creature.

Vader rallied, tried to press home his advantage. Elsewhere, a maddened rhyacorn tossed a vulkor across its back, a metharian batted a pard aside and trumpeted victory; Vader hewed about heavily, and drove Han back. A diving vulture-hawk almost clawed Han's throat out, only to be driven off at the last second by a battle-angry gyrfalcon.

"Excellent," murmured the Dark Lord. Both sets of Force-beasts, attacking and defending, vanished.

Han disengaged, somersaulted over an outside swipe at his knees, and waited for Vader's next move. He smiled coldly. "I do my Master proud," he said.

Vader, from pride, had taken the major part of the battle against the Emperor on himself. Han, knowing what was to come, had let him. Now Han sensed that the older man was faltering, was draining his powers more seriously than he was aware. It was a long time since Vader had fought an equal opponent. . .

"You lose everything, Han. There is too much blood on your hands. The rebels will never trust you." Objects about the room — pictures, mirrors, sconces — came flying toward Han. Without taking his attention from the Dark Lord, Han built a Force-wall around himself, a wall against which the lethally flying implements shattered on contact.

Vader feinted left. Han ignored the false attack. Reverting to his old style, the style Vader had thought drilled out of him years ago, he dove straight through, stabbing the Dark Lord cleanly. Han pulled back, held his saber at the ready. Vader stood there a second, and Han was aware of Vader's sudden wonder at his mortality. Then Vader collapsed face downward, his scarlet robes pooling around him on the floor.

Han deactivated his saber, stared down at his fallen Master. "Trust? No, perhaps not." He sighed, deeply, and said, "But I've been alone before." He knelt by Vader's body and his expression softened. Almost, he regretted the need for Vader's death. The training had brought them together, had made them closer than father and son. But it was too late to think of that. It had been too late when Vader first coerced him to his side.

Han touch Vader's shoulder softly in farewell, then picked up the other's lightsaber. Standing, he hooked both sabers onto his belt and straightened the black robes he wore in honor of his Master.

Without a backward glance at the empty throne, Han walked toward the massive bronze doors at the far end of the throne room. The doors opened at his approach, clanged shut behind him.

...and about the throne, the shadows gathered.



SOLO'S GIRL

Gatonpaulis

(to "Jessie's Girl" by Rick Springfield)

Han Solo is a friend;
Yeah, I know he's been a good friend of mine.
But lately something's changed.
It ain't hard to define.
Solo's got himself a girl
And I want to make her mine.

CHORUS: And she's watching him with those eyes.
And she's loving him with that body
—I just know it
And he's holding her in his arms, late, late at night.
You know I wish that I had Solo's girl.
I wish that I had Solo's girl.
What can't I find me a woman like that?

I play along with the charade.
There doesn't seem to be a reason to change.
You know I feel so funny when they start talking loud
I want to tell her that I love her
But I know that three's a crowd.

(CHORUS)

Like Solo's girl,
I wish that I had Solo's girl.
Why can't I find a woman
Why can't I find a woman like that?

Then I look in the mirror all the time
Wonderin' what she don't see in me.
I've been helping, I've been there when she needs—
Isn't that the way love's supposed to be?
Tell me—

(CHORUS)

ESCAPE FROM ≈ CANCELLATION ≈

Howard Weinstein

It was Apollo's fault. Starbuck found himself in awkward situations because Apollo was always too busy smiling shyly at all the young ladies on board, or earnestly seeing to it that Boxey grew up straight and true, now that his maw was gone. Starbuck didn't have the heart to tell his Boy Scout buddy that Boxey was already running the biggest floating crap game in the fleet. Oh, well, if Apollo never wondered why the kid hadn't asked for an allowance, that was his problem, not Starbuck's.

Starbuck's problem was finding himself on board the Imperial battlestar Imperial Battlestar (the Cylons never did have much imagination), accompanied by a Cylon named Quentin and a dagget named George.

Quentin was a maladjusted Cylon — he was friendly. And George was a maladjusted dagget — all he did was whimper and whine and stop every three feet to scratch his little electronic fleas.

Starbuck's mission was to sneak onto the Imperial battlestar Imperial Battlestar and sabotage it. Adama thought it was a wonderful idea — but Adama didn't have to do it. The only way was to befriend a Cylon, which Starbuck did by introducing Quentin to addictive little marijuana cigars. It was a dirty trick, but Starbuck had no scruples. To him, scruples was just a bad novel — and two bad TV movies. Besides, the plan worked. And that was how Starbuck came to be sneaking about the corridors of an enemy ship, dressed in a cheap copy of a Cylon suit made out of aluminum foil. Most of the Cylons were too dumb to notice, but what could be expected from people

with little blinky lights for eyes?

George the dagget stopped again, whined piteously — but didn't scratch. He just sat. Then he began to sniff and circle. The only reason Starbuck could see for George's presence was the cask of booze around his neck. George continued to sniff about, then started to squat. Starbuck had no newspapers with him, so he had to think fast. The sort of evidence George was about to leave behind even Cylons might notice.

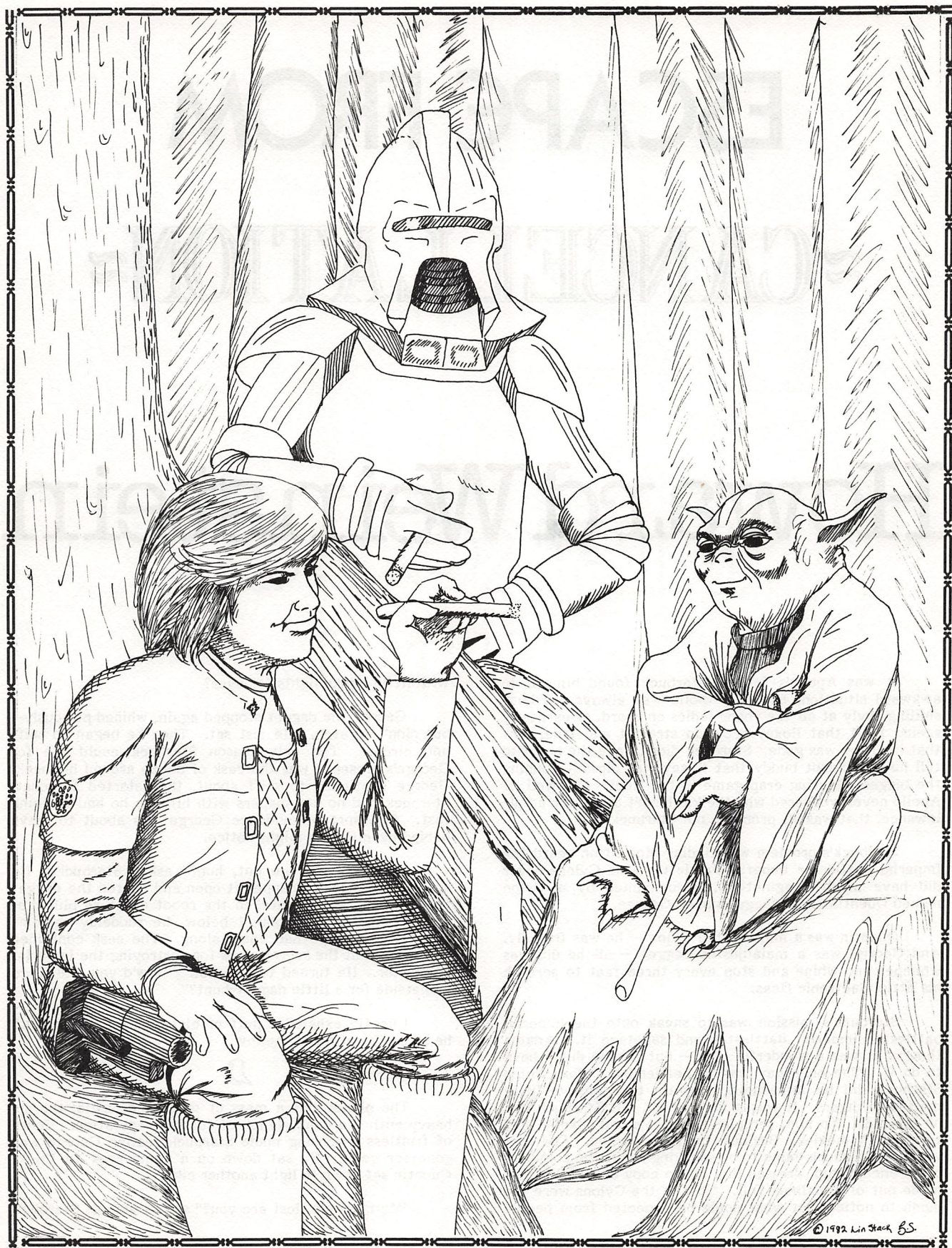
"You want to go out, huh?" asked Starbuck. He spotted an airlock, snapped it open and booted the dagget into space. As he watched the robot creature plummet toward the unknown planet below, he suddenly remembered why George had come along. The cask contained not booze, but the secret plans for destroying the Imperial battlestar. He turned to Quentin. "How'd you like to go planetside for a little dagget-hunt?"

Quentin exhaled a puff of cigar smoke. "Far out," he said. Quentin was mellow.



The planet was a mass of mists and jungle, the air heavy with the dank stench of rotting vegetation. Hours of fruitless searching made Starbuck realize George was gone for good. He sat down on a slimy rock to think. Quentin sat down to light another cigar.

"Mmmhmmm, lost are you?" said a voice. Starbuck



thought it sounded familiar, like a cross between Fozzie Bear, Miss Piggy and Grover. The voice came from above — and Starbuck saw a floppy-eared little gnome float down to the ground.

"Starbuck you are, hmmm?"

"How do you know?"

"Many things I can see with the Force, including name tags on underwear."

"Yeah, well, I got problems, so bug off, fuzz-head."

"Message I have for you, yesss."

Starbuck tensed. "Is it in code?"

"Why else talking like this would I be?"

"Okay, short-green-and-ugly, what's the message?"

"From the future it is. Trapped here you are; home you can't go."

Starbuck didn't like the message, and he clamped a hand on the gnome's collar, lifting him up to eye level. "Why not?"

"Cancelled your show has been, hmmm."

Starbuck dropped the gnome. "I don't believe it, dog-ears. We were supposed to be the hit of the new season."

"Believe it. Mine the future is. Starbuck dolls in the markdown stores will be. Yo-da dolls big thing now, yesss!"

Starbuck would hear none of it. He insisted on trying to get back to his buddies. "They need me. After all the girls find out how boring Apollo is, they'll even take a sleazeball like me. I can't give that up."

"Very bad future I see. Friends gone."

"You mean, I've gone through a — time warp?"

"Warped you are, yesss. But no time warp. New writers, yesss. Bad writers, double yesss! Only one left is: Alpo guy. Adama. Suddenly beard he had grown — not want to be recognized. New series really stinks!"

Despite the heat, Starbuck broke into a cold sweat. "What was it — I mean, what will it be about?" he asked fearfully.

"Horrible things. 1980. Bad year: Reagan won election. Little kids and silly flying motorcycles — Chips in Space."

Starbuck looked crushed. "Any girls?"

"Pretty girl from *Breaking Away* movie," said Yoda. Starbuck perked up, but Yoda shook his head slowly. "Not worth trip back."

"But I've gotta try to save them," said Starbuck.

"Only thing to save them is plot transplant. Cute guy you are; writer you are not."

Starbuck sank back onto the rock. Yoda sensed his apprehension. "Choice you have—"

"What choice?" said Starbuck hopelessly.

Yoda pursed his lips. "Go home to series — such a turkey through Thanksgiving not last will it; cancelled it get you — or with me stay. Jedi I train you to be. Got room for," he paused dramatically, "one other. Then you pop up in third movie and really screw up fans, yesss?" Yoda cackled in delight, his ears bobbing up and down.

Starbuck thought for a moment, then shrugged. "What the hell," he said, shoving Quentin off the rock into the swamp. When he heard the Cylon's last metallic gurgle, Starbuck turned to Yoda. "I'm starving. What's for dinner? Something smells great!"

"That garbage, idiot. Wait 'til you smell Yoda stew!"

"Y'know, this could be the start of a beautiful friendship," said Starbuck as they walked off into the fog.

The Call

They call me special, they say I'm the one,
And that through me their battle is won.
They see me a warrior, one proud, brave and true,
To bring back their Old Republic anew;
But there's so many things I've yet to do...

Am I really so different, someone to cause awe?
To make people break from the Empire's cruel law?
I'm only a farm boy, one scared and alone,
Missing my family, missing my home;
Wanting to go back to the things I have known...

You give me your fame, but do I deserve it?
Throw the big party, I'll act the hero, yet
Something else fills me, a Force huge and tall,
Making me feel so incredibly small;
It holds me, and I answer to its slightest call.

Jenni

The Visit Home

Jani Hicks

(to "Silkie", Childe #113
The Great Silkie of Schule Skerry)

A TALE OF THE CONTRAVERSE
from the Journals of Sharna Kenobi Skywalker

I watched the woman sit and sing above my sleeping baby wee
And long I've mourned my boy's father in that dark world so far from me.

For not long ago I left my babe into my husband's sister's care
And long I've searched for safety sad, and long I've thought upon him there.

He grows more fair as each day pass, and someday fairer still he'll be.
And if his father's blood is strong, he'll grow to serve the galaxy.

I brought a gift for my young man, and placed it in his aunt's sweet care:
A silver box from Alderaan with her fair crescent blazoned there.

"It may come to pass," I said to her, "that he may come to ask of me—
He must not know that I've been here, or that I still might living be.

"If he his father's saber takes, though noble shall his battle be,
In making this his own free choice, a broken heart he'll leave to me.

"That saber cost his father's life, a fugitive one's made of me,
But if he wants and if he works, it's sure that he'll a Jedi be."

And so with tears I turned to go, and kissed my sleeping baby 'bye;
I kissed my husband's sister, too, and back into the night went I.

Captain Solo

Jani Hicks

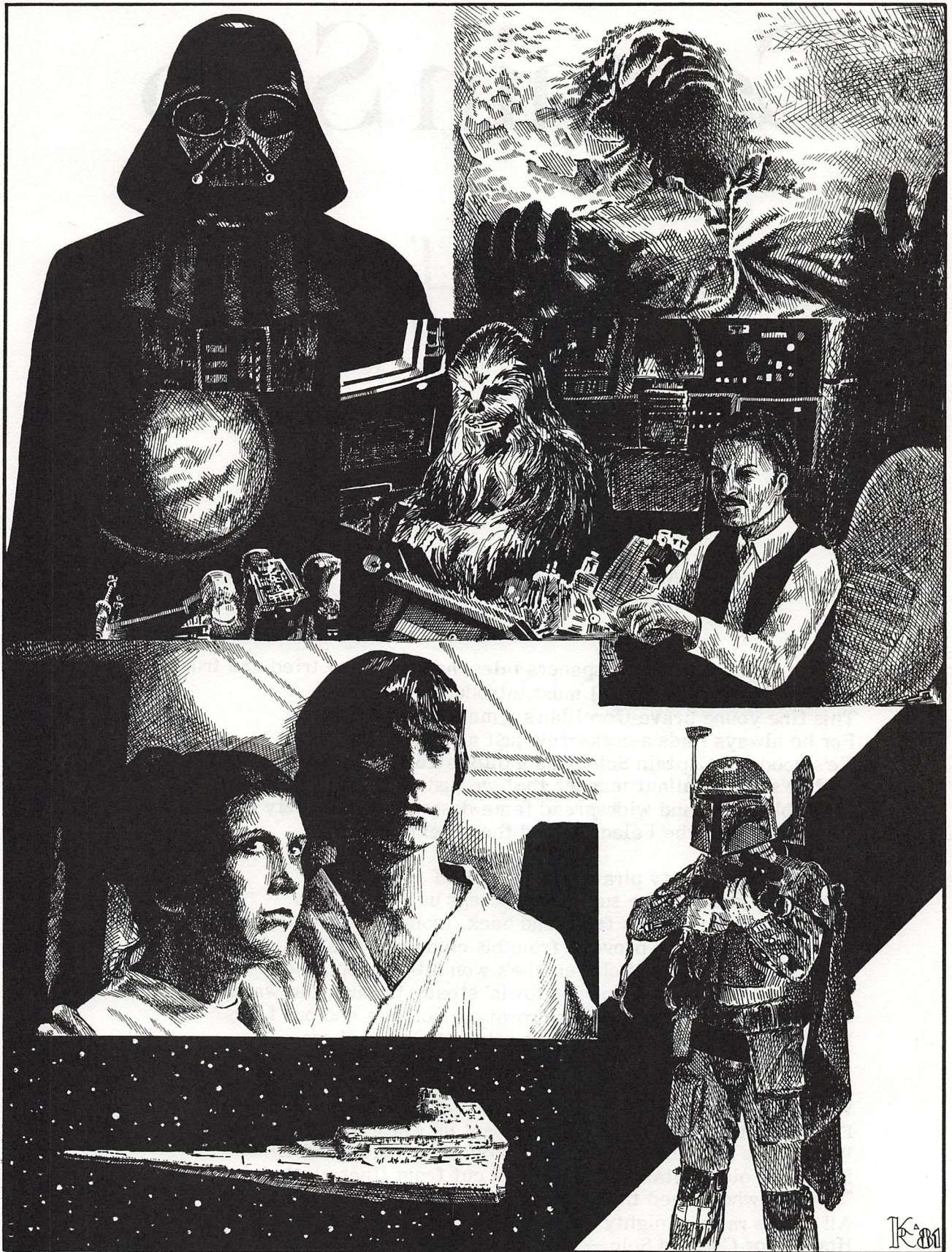
(traditional Irish, "General Guinness")

A TALE OF THE CONTRAVERSE
from the Journals of Sharna Kenobi Skywalker

You've heard a thousand spacers tales, and each one tried and true,
But here's another pirate I must introduce to you.
This fine young brave Corellian's a man we all applaud
For he always finds a corkscrew just as useful as a broad.
He's good old Captain Solo; he's a pilot strong and stout,
And he's got a gallant manner that we just can't live without.
His noble name and widespread fame deserve three hearty cheers:
He's captain of the Falcon — and the rebel boozaliers.

This hale and hearty pirate is the pride of rebel ranks
For in the guise of our supplies he keeps us all in tanks.
He's borne attack from front and back, from north, south, east and west,
With battle scars to prove it from his chin down past his chest.
He's our fine Captain Solo, and he's won all our applause.
'Twas he who kept our spirits flowin' steady through the wars.
Who's always there to help us drown our sorrows and our fears?
Why, good old Captain Solo — and the rebel boozaliers.

All over each and every base, his work is never through.
We've handed him our credits and he's gotten us our brew.
From Alderaan to Dantooine, he's kept us warm and bright;
We'll all be glad to toast his health on any moonlit night!
He's good old Captain Solo, no one's cut from finer cloth,
'Twas he who turned the 'raani Sea into the Sea of Froth.
All rebels raise a mighty cheer in spirit and in truth:
Hurrah for Captain Solo — may his life be ninety proof!



K&B

A JEDI CRAVES NOT THESE THINGS

Susan R. Matthews

Lando Calrissian sat at the controls of the converted freighter the Millennium Falcon and considered how best to discourage the Wookiee from dismembering him.

It wouldn't be for anything that had happened between himself and Han Solo in the past, the handsome black man mused, his seductive warm brown eyes momentarily fox-bright with merriment at his memory's replay of his past relations with the Wookiee's Corellian partner. Lando had never really pulled any very nasty tricks on Solo — although he'd felt inclined, strongly inclined, to do some suitably permanent damage to the cocky young captain who'd out-hustled him. Lando felt fairly secure that Chewbacca the Wookiee, his present co-pilot, didn't know about the time he had ached Solo's cargo out from under him on Xantire. Lando frowned at the thought.

It had started out as a joke, just a joke, part of the game Han and Lando both enjoyed so well. Lando had bought the cargo Han had been contracted to carry from Xantire to Churshyen; bought it and transferred it surreptitiously to another freighter. Then he'd sat back to watch the fun as Han searched unsuccessfully for another cargo, another way off-planet. Lando knew Han, had known he couldn't afford to clear Xantire without a cargo. He'd intended to let the boy sweat for a while — only what he deserved after slipping 'the fastest hunk of junk in the galaxy' away from her rightful owner in that sabacc match.

But all of a sudden, the joke had gone sour, and the game he'd been playing on Xantire got too serious. He hadn't known about the latest Imperial warrant out on Han; hadn't known about the interest the gutter informants of Xantire port had been taking in Han Solo. And

Lando had found himself in the uncomfortable position of having shipped his crew — the only beings Lando had felt he could trust — off-planet just when he'd needed them the most, to throw up a screen, to protect Han.

Lando himself had been in what he'd known for one of Han's favorite cantinas in that port when the trouble had really started. He had come to find Han. He had meant to explain, to admit his part in Han's predicament; he had the money, cash, Han needed to make a fast sprint away. The troopers had come, there had been some unpleasantness. Solo was gone, nowhere to be found; and shortly after the troops had shot the tavern up, the news filtered around that the Falcon had made a clean getaway. Lando had given the money to the cantina's mistress instead. It came at a time when he'd needed the money himself, but he'd felt responsible. It wasn't his fault that it had all happened that way; the situation had just gotten out of hand, that was all. But he had felt responsible.

And now he'd gone and done it again to Solo, and he felt more than responsible; he felt grief and concern and a certain amount of healthy fear of Chewbacca. And still it wasn't his fault, exactly — the situation had just gotten out of control, there had been too many things he just hadn't known about. Or had time to find out. After all, he hadn't even seen Solo for years — maybe three, maybe five, certainly not since he'd won the mining colony. And the Sith lord, Vader, had come upon him by surprise; he'd had no choice. For the safety of the colony, he had had no choice; he knew it, but he still felt lower than a Vuunsal sewer-feeder. He could tell himself as often as he cared to that he couldn't have known, that he couldn't be blamed for Han's torture, for Han's capture and subsequent 're-sale' to the notorious bounty hunter Boba

Fett. He couldn't make himself quite believe it. It had been the screams that did it, Lando decided. It was still difficult for him to accept the idea that even Darth Vader, even the terrible neural translator, could force such cries from Han Solo, the stubbornest bastard in space.

Which brought him back to his present situation. As far as Chewbacca was concerned, Lando felt, he was living on borrowed time right now. Chewbacca had not heard the screams, Chewbacca had had problems of his own, but both Chewbacca and he had seen what the pain had done to Han — how unnaturally weak he had seemed, how white his face had been. And Chewbacca had seen his Corellian enslaved in the carbon freezing chamber, Lando's carbon freezing chamber; and Lando knew that such unpleasant reminders of the fate of too many Wookiees was bound to rest very badly with Chewbacca indeed. He'd teased Chewbacca about the fact that he was still with Han, after all the years they'd run together, but Lando knew well enough that the affection and the love that kept that peculiar partnership together in the face of Wookiee contentiousness and Corellian intransigence was strong and deep and abiding enough to make anyone in his own position uncomfortable indeed. Chewbacca had postponed strangling him on that remarkable princess Leia's urging, in order that they might try to rescue Han from the bounty hunter before Fett cleared the cloud city. Now the prospects of rescuing Han at all had to be considered unencouraging, and Leia was not there to protect him, and Lando was just not very comfortable. And still, the idea of skipping out, away, removing himself from both the quest to rescue Han and the threat of Wookiee-execution did not occur to Lando Calrissian. Han was, all else being equal, his friend. And he was responsible.

The motley collection of near-obsolete spacecraft that represented their Alliance rendezvous was still fairly near against the starfield when the Falcon jumped to hyper.

"How're we doing?" Lando asked; he and Chewbacca had some standard procedures to run through now, and the silence was unnerving. "Can she still take point three seven past light speed?"

//Point five,// Chewbacca retorted, not looking at Calrissian. //Fuel mix. Reading operfour two—//

"Operfour two, check. You serious? point five? What's he been doing to my baby?"

//Ratio on primary comp, larison six,// was the Wookiee's only response. Lando tried again.

"Larison six, check. Look, Chewbacca, you've got to talk to me. We've got to work together, remember?"

//You being having must working with me. We having to finding Han. If we not being finding Han you not being working anymore. Very easy to understanding. Ratio on second comp merkel eight.//

"Merkel eight. Check. Do you think I planned it this way?"

//I thinking we being finding Han. If we not doing I being killing you. Ratio on tertiary comp rairdan two. You being playing holochess?//

Lando sighed. At least it was a beginning. "Rairdan two, check. No check — three point one. Chewbacca, I

just happen to be the quadrant's foremost expert on holochess..." Well, Chewbacca could hardly dismember him in the middle of a chess game, could he?



ll...ee...aah...ll...ee...aah...

It was hard to put the word together, it dragged across his benumbed brain so slowly. Still, the word was all he was aware of, the separate elements of "ll" and "ee" and "aah" over and over again. Until, in the slow confusion of his mind, he set what energy he could muster to the search for meaning behind the sounds. It was hard, it was so hard, he raged in helpless futile immobility at the molasses-drag, the inexplicable resistance in his brain that was like the nightmare of running through fields of resistance: running and running and never getting anywhere.

There was something gone critically wrong in his head, he couldn't think. Literally could not think. It was as if the connections at each synapse took ten times as long to activate, as if he were trying to think in slow motion. Dimly, dimly he could perceive — vaguely, and indistinctly — the messages from his body, from his physical person. Slow motion. No distress, no discomfort, shortness of breath, panic of failed heartbeat. No focus, no attention to analyze his situation, no will to make sense of it.

Sometimes he fought to grasp the significance, sometimes he just listened to the sounds in his mind.

ll...ee...aah...ll...ee...aah...



Leia Organa turned slowly from the viewport as the Millennium Falcon blinked out of normal space. It seemed to Luke Skywalker that Leia was blinking rather more rapidly than usual. He said nothing. In a moment she spoke to him, and her voice held no trace of what might have been her tears.

"We're going to need you as badly as ever, Luke. Are you going to be able to take a squadron?"

He was a little bit surprised; the question he had expected to hear from her was not the one she'd asked. He'd expected her, almost actually heard her, ask for reassurance, for a certain measure of comfort — 'oh, Luke, do you think they'll find Han in time?' — but then, he reminded himself, she was a leader, and a warrior. The rebel leader Organa needed to know the status of her personnel resources as badly as the woman Leia — particularly vulnerable just now — needed, wanted, to be comforted. He could offer only a small measure of comfort to Leia. The situation demanded he disappoint the princess Organa entirely.

"I'd give what's left of both Newblue and Moroso to Amburu Eder," he said. "It'll make for a slightly larger unit, but Eder can handle it. She's sharp. I left my teacher too soon, nearly destroyed myself in Vader's trap. I've got to go back to Master Yoda."

"Yes," she agreed, softly. "Yes, you must go back to your teacher...that's as important, surely, as the fleet. To defeat Vader and his Emperor we need Jedi skills."

"I'll miss you, Luke."

"It'll be all right," he answered her gently, and gave her a little hug. "You did just fine without us before, didn't you? I don't know how long I'll be gone, Leia. But I'll be waiting for good news about Han." He dropped his arm from her shoulder, a little uncomfortable, slightly uncertain about his own sincerity. "Have you decided where to make the next base?"

Leia raised her head and caught her breath, looking as if she were about to speak; but then, seeming to think better of it, she pressed her lips together and shook her once-more lowered head.

It was good he'd mentioned Han; it reminded him. "I've checked with the intelligence comp techs, Leia. They've transmitted the statistics Lando gave us on the Slave I to the rest of our stations. And there's Chewie's signal — if he has news before I get back."

"Chela. The Ocor Deuce base. Artoo has the data for you. You'll leave immediately, then? Has the doctor cleared you?" It hardly seemed to be a question, as if she'd already decided he was leaving immediately. Her next words were almost light in tone. "You've been hanging around with Han for too long, Luke. You've begun to pick up some of his bad habits."

"I've got to go now, Leia. I can't afford to wait any longer than it takes to make sure that signal will come through on Alliance comps if I don't make the rendezvous on Tatooine. I shouldn't have left Master Yoda in the first place." Luke said it almost angrily, but he couldn't pretend that his anger was at himself rather than his failure to believe that what he said was true.

"You could hardly have abandoned your friends to Vader, Luke, whatever the cost. You mustn't think you were to blame for it. Luke?" Leia raised her dark troubled eyes to his, and knit her brow. "Be careful."

It was almost a dismissal. Luke understood Leia's need to say her formal farewells and be done with it, but he couldn't quite leave her like his.

"I can't help Han now, Leia. Chewbacca and Lando — they know the territory, they know they Hut. I don't know any of that. All I know is that I've got to get back. I don't know half of what I need to know yet — what I need to know to do any good for the Rebellion." He felt a little ashamed of his need to excuse himself, but Leia seemed to accept his words in their best possible light.

"You weren't doing half badly with the squadron, Luke. No, it's all right. I think I understand what you're going through. I just wish I could be more confident of your safety. Of Han's safety."



The Sith lord Vader turned slowly from the viewport, his posture more expressive of his abstraction than his immobile visor could be. Admiral Piett was glad of the Dark Lord's thoughtfulness; for as long as Vader was musing, Vader was not asking embarrassing questions. Admiral Piett had no explanation for the sudden recovery of that wretched freighter's hyperdrive. He was perfectly aware, however, that Vader had wanted the craft and its passengers, that Vader could hardly be pleased with this latest in a series of setbacks. He knew Vader blamed it on the incompetence of his Imperial support, his Imperial officers.

Vader strolled slowly from the viewport to join the admiral near one of the command coms. He faced Piett, unspeaking. Piett noted the extra weapon where it hung, paired with Vader's own, from the Sith lord's armored waist. Why Vader would be wearing two of those things Piett did not know; it was apparently some sort of remembrance from the Death Star. Vader toyed with the weapon idly; it looked rather dull and lusterless in his black-gloved hand. He caressed it as if it were a token of great significance; and then he spoke.

"A remarkable performance for a ship with no hyperdrive, Admiral Piett," he said. His words filtered more acidly through his breathscreen than usual. "Wouldn't you agree? It would interest me to know who is responsible for this latest — stupidity."

Admiral Piett heard this last with a failing heart. He should have known better, he told himself, than to think Lord Vader would let this major irritation pass unremarked; Vader never missed the slightest detail. But then that was the way it was, the way it always would be. He'd worked hard in the fleet all his life, pulled him up through the competitive ranks of the Command branch's officer corps, and now — according to the unwritten laws of capricious fate — he was going to lose it all over a handful of prisoners and a modified freighter. Lord Vader wasn't even in his normal chain of command; somehow Admiral Piett resented that more than anything else.

"You forget yourself, my lord," he said firmly, loudly enough to be clearly heard by the startled technicians, his anxious subordinates. "I am responsible. By your command." He stood up straight, proudly, staring at the point several millimeters behind the reflective sensor-lenses of the plate-armor visor where he imagined Lord Vader's eyes — or whatever served the Sith lord for eyes — to be. He was aware that Vader no longer toyed with the lightsaber, and braced himself. What would it be for him? the asphyxiation that had taken Admiral Ozzel; or the sudden failure of the heart, the clawing pain that had rewarded Captain Needa's attempts at explanation?

Vader was still for a moment, the expressionless mask somehow more frightfully amused than anything else. It was unnerving enough under the best of circumstances, the remarkable fluidity of expression Lord Vader's immobile mask could demonstrate. And now... there was no sound but for the sighing of the respirator. Then:

"You are only too correct, Admiral Piett. Well? what is your explanation? your reason for the untruth you told me when you said the ship could not make the jump to hyperspace?"

"My lord, I ask you to remember what I said. I said that the hyperdrive had been disabled by the central computer on Bespin. I said nothing of subsequent developments, Lord Vader."

"That does not strike me as a satisfactory apology, Admiral."

Any minute now and it would all be over; any breath could be his last. Some perverse spark of pride, of confident self-esteem, fired Piett's words to military precision. If he was going to follow Ozzel and Needa, at least he would do it like a man — and a professional soldier.

"It is not an apology, Lord Vader."

The Sith lord nodded as if in satisfaction; Piett, with an effort, forced himself not to hold his breath as he awaited the immediate termination of his mortal existence. To his confoundment and confusion, Vader merely turned away, still nodding reflectively; and when Vader spoke to him, there were no further hinted threats, but a certain dry and almost grudging commendation.

"Then you will be my man, Admiral Piett. I am pleased to see that at least one of my ranking officers remembers where his duty lies, his responsibility. Call General Veers. I will see you both in my quarters to discuss the occupation of the cloud-city of Bespin."



"Hey, look, I know this is rotten timing. But tell me why you're still with Han anyway. I would 'a' thought you'd find yourself a more respectable partner."

Chewbacca sat cleaning his mangonel patiently, only half-listening to Calrissian's attempts to draw him out. Lando himself was hard at work on the sensitive sightgyro systems of some of the projectiles — work too delicate for a Wookiee, especially a Wookiee with a temper even more short-fused than usual. //He being responsible, // Chewbacca said, pausing to carefully clean a spilled drop of lubricant from his pelted lap before he broke the bolt down further.

"Then what was he doing with the Hut in the first place?"

Chewbacca snorted. //That being none of your business. You being not knowing much about Jabba, you being? //

"Come on. Everybody knows about Jabba; he's the most notorious—"

//I being saying you being not knowing, I not being? We being in Mos Eisley, Calrissian, you being letting me handle the talking. And you being more quick with my ammunition, we being almost there. //

"Sounds fair enough," Lando agreed, turning his attention to the projectiles. Not as if there'd be any arguing with Chewbacca, of course. He was just as happy to be part of the background when the Wookiee, whose attachment to Han Solo evidently transcended the usual business partnership Lando had thought it to be, faced the being responsible for Han's torture. Han's imprisonment, Lando amended. Lando could blame the bounty hunter for Solo's imprisonment; the bounty hunter had been after Solo quite independently of Darth Vader's ambiguous plans for him. But Lando felt — and felt Chewbacca held him — personally responsible for Han's torture. Chewbacca hadn't killed him yet; Lando wondered how long it would last.

He certainly hoped it would last until they found Han. He hadn't told Chewbacca everything about Han's true condition yet — but if they were too late to save Solo's life, Calrissian knew there would be nothing left to tell.



Mos Eisley spaceport.

Chewbacca brought them in outside the boundaries of the port, berthed them in a docking bay that had ap-

parently been disused for years. Lando commented on that fact to Chewbacca, who barked laughter in response.

//Tatooine. On Tatooine three months being like three years. Wind, dust, sun, extremes of temperature. This being a good friend, a safe haven, this docking bay. // And from the way Chewbacca brought the Falcon in, he was indeed familiar with the docking bay. Lando surmised that Han had used it when he wasn't interested in doing business then and there. Its relatively isolated location made it a good place for unobtrusive comings and goings, but by the same token it was too conspicuous a place for any delivery of cargo. Lando followed the Wookiee out into the sunshine, and took a deep breath of fresh air incautiously. He could see it was going to take him a while to adjust to life off Bespin again — this air was thick with dust, and it stank. Lando Calrissian was widely traveled, and had as much experience with exotic stenches as anyone. The air still stank. Well, they only had to stay here as long as it took them to find Han, to rescue Han. The most he could do was hope it wouldn't take too long.

They had walked to the outskirts of the town before Chewbacca spoke.

//We being going to the place where the Hut being doing his business. We being offering repaying the debt, first. We being needing to knowing whether Slave I being having making delivery. //

Lando hadn't really thought that that detail was much of a problem. The idea concerned him — and yet he had to conceal that concern, if possible, from Chewbacca, who didn't know what Lando knew about Han's true situation.

"What do you mean, what would hold Boba Fett up? The price on Han's head—"

//Boba Fett being not about ready delivering his prize until Jabba being having paying. And Jabba being not about ready paying until— //

"Right. I got it." It was a good point, too, and a comforting one. Unless Jabba and Fett had come to terms immediately, the odds were that Fett was still in possession of his cargo. It would not be any easier to deal with Boba Fett than with Jabba the Hut, but at least if Fett still had Solo, then Jabba could not have begun to take his revenge.

Lando had heard a little about the Hut, could extrapolate from what he knew as well as the next man. The Hut was a sharp dealer, a pragmatic businessser, but he did lose his temper occasionally. And when he did — well, Jabba the Hut was not a very pleasant being when that happened. And he'd put out a lot of credits for Solo's capture. He was going to want to get his money's worth, and he was probably going to take it out of Solo's hide.

//You being listening to me, Lando? This being what we being doing... //



The bully boys that hung out at the Colleach Kol seemed to recognize Chewbacca immediately. Lando was aware of quite a stir when he and Chewbacca came in off the street. Nervous bunch, he noted; but it was probably feared that Chewbacca would make some rash move, threaten to destroy the place. Instead, the Wookiee

brushed the dust from his lower leg-fur thoughtfully, standing in the doorway as if inviting anyone who hadn't noticed him to do so immediately. Lando had argued that this approach was likely to get him shot, but Chewbacca had insisted that he knew this crowd, that first they'd want to know what Chewbacca was going to do.

Lando examined the various beings in the room from the corner table where he had sat down. Mean-looking bunch, ready to shoot at an instant's notice — but, yes, curious first to see what the Wookiee was up to.

Having performed his perfunctory grooming, Chewbacca went to the bar and spoke soothingly enough to the 'tender to buy a large pitcher of brew from the uncertain Van Atta male. Lando could almost feel the anticipation of a fight growing into increasingly puzzled intrigue as Chewbacca brought the drinks over to Lando at the corner table. Once seated, Chewbacca took a thirsty drink — Lando understood his desire to clear the dust from his throat — and commented low into Lando's ear, too softly to be heard by anyone else.

//The Van Atta there being one of Jabba's favorites for dirty revenging. If the Van Atta being not with Jabba, then neither being Han yet.// Lando nodded his appreciation of this, and took a swallow of the brew as he continued to watch the bar.

It didn't take too long. A few minutes, perhaps as much as a third of a standard, and one of Jabba's bullies — she would have been beautiful, Lando knew, if it hadn't been for the scars freelance Rhodrix wore so proudly —

sauntered over to where they sat, making a gret show of her casual unconcern. Lando wondered if he'd have to interpret for Chewbacca — but she spoke to the Wookiee, ignoring Lando, and he concluded that the woman understood Chewbacca's speech.

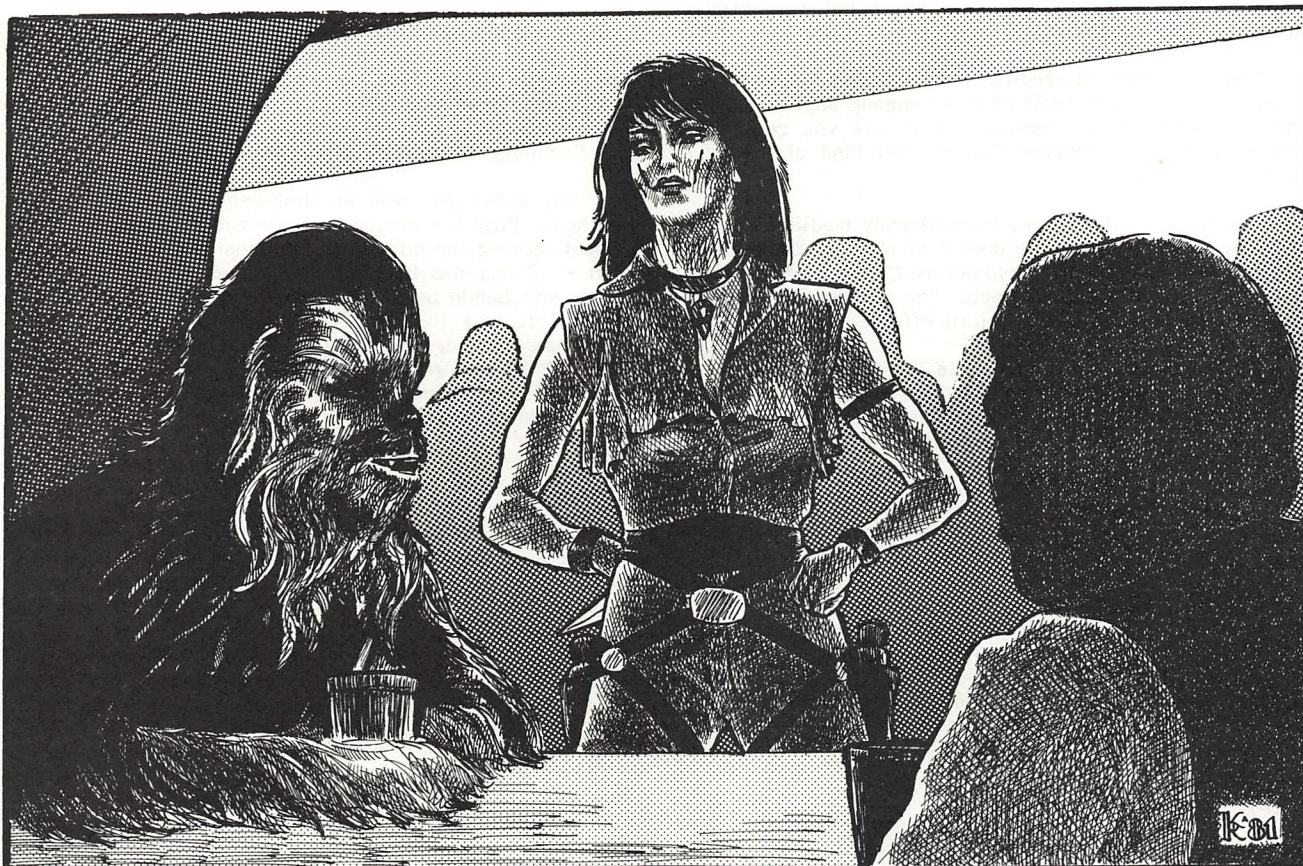
"Hey, how's the climate on Bespin, Wookiee?" she rasped. Chewbacca took no notice of her, hadn't even really looked at her. He gazed serenely off into the middle distance.

The moment lengthened as the Rhodrix woman stood there. Lando knew she was probably losing what patience she pretended to have; Rhodrix disliked above all things being made to look ridiculous, and Chewbacca was taking full advantage of that.

"All right," she snarled again, and sat down. Lando examined her clinically. Whether it was the timber of her voice or the harsh guttural cough of her Rhodrix accent he couldn't tell for certain, but he did know that her voice was singularly offensive. "I'll play your game; you won't make a fool out of me. Now. What do you want here?"

Chewbacca made an elaborate show of seeing her for the first time. //Singlesuns, being it? Singlesuns, I not being expecting to seeing you here. I being coming to talking to Jabba, not some sterile-sanded Rhodrix no-blade.//

Lando gave Chewbacca marks for the excellence of his choice of words. The woman overreacted splendidly



to the double insult, as Rhodrix were prone to do.

"No-blade, is it, you geldpelt? I'll give you no-blade—" She rose suddenly, upsetting her chair, and made a motion as if to draw the ungainly weapon she wore across the back of her waist and riding on her buttocks. Chewbacca took no notice. She stood glaring for another long moment, nostrils flaring dramatically, but she seemed to be growing uneasy. Lando could sympathize with her there. She did look silly.

"And why," she hissed through melodramatically clenched teeth, "why should my Honored One wish to see such as you?"

Lando raised his glass abruptly, using the gesture to conceal a sudden smirk. It wasn't that their situation, their mission, wasn't deadly serious. But hearing Jabba the Hut described as "honored" was too much for him to take and maintain a straight face. He knew it was the standard Rhodrix formula for 'employer', but to hear the Hut referred to in the same terms as a Rhodrix warlord... Chewbacca murmured something, took a swallow from his glass. The woman slapped her hand down on the table, scowling ferociously. "What did you say?"

//Cargo of spice,// Chewbacca repeated, as if he were talking to Lando. //And half a cargo on top of it. Han Solo being owing the Hut some money. We being coming to paying the debt for him.//

"Oh, well, then, you needn't have bothered. Jabba collects what he is owed. And Jabba's straightened it out already."

Now, for the first time, Chewbacca looked directly at the Rhodrix, and spoke in a voice pitched to carry clearly to all corners of the room. //Jabba the Hut not being happy with any being who being not respecting Jabba the Hut's credits.//

"Twenty thousand credits," Lando added helpfully in Galactic — for the benefit of those among Jabba's security who didn't speak Wookiee. "Now, are you going to deprive the— ah— Honored One of that kind of money, or—"

But three of the guards were already hustling Lando and Chewbacca through the door that shielded Jabba the Hut from the rest of the world before Calrissian had even finished the rest of the sentence. The mention of money, as always, was nearly magical in its effect.

The door shut behind them, leaving them alone in a small back room with Jabba the Hut — and five of his bully-boys, though the Rhodrix was not among them. Odd, for one of Jabba's ilk. Then Lando turned his attention to the Hut.

Jabba the Hut was almost as thick as he was tall, from what Lando could tell. The Hut was seated behind a table piled high with dirty dishes, half-eaten scraps of food, sticky stains of spilt fluids. His ugliness transcended all ethnic barriers; Lando was a man who had appreciated beauty in many forms, and Jabba the Hut was as perfectly un-comely as anything Lando could have imagined. Jabba stared suspiciously over the filthy table at them for a long moment, enabling Lando to speculate on whether it was the quite possibly rotten food there that stank so badly or Jabba himself.

Then Jabba spoke. "So?"

//Twenty-five thousand credits,// Chewbacca said. The Hut glared up at the Wookiee irritably, then returned his bilious stare to Lando's face, evidently waiting for translation.

"So we pay what the captain owes you," Lando replied. "A debt of twenty-five thousand credits. If you cancel your contract on Han Solo."

"Twenty-five is a pittance. Han Solo has offended my sense of propriety. After the way I loved that boy, winked at his misdeeds—"

"Thirty thousand. Cash on delivery."

Jabba seemed to relax, his hostility seemed to melt under the genial influence of the prospect of all that lovely money. "But I always knew he'd come through. I never once was afraid he'd let me down. Contract, what contract? That was just a gentle reminder. Delivery of what?"

"Your 'gentle reminder' is going to cost you thirty thousand credits if you can't deliver the merchandise." Chewbacca roared menacingly in reinforcement, and Jabba actually smiled.

"Merchandise, my boy? What could you be talking about?"

Lando made a great show of consulting his chronometer. "Come on, man. We haven't got all day. Are you in the market for thirty-five thousand credits — or aren't you?" The direction the conversation had taken let him check the time without arousing suspicion, and he was glad of that. They didn't have all day. They barely had two-tenths — give or take a fraction — before the raid was due to start.

"I'm in the market," Jabba smiled, "for — my pride. My pride needs salvaging, my boy. And — actually — thirty, even thirty-five, won't do it...no, I'd need eighty-five, maybe even ninety."

"—ninety thousand?" Lando sputtered.

"Oh, I can give you an itemized account," the Hut soothed. "First the money Solo owes me; then the money I spent looking for him; then the money wasted on Boba Fett—" Jabba was becoming visibly angrier by the moment, and Lando began to be a little nervous about his timing. It was too soon yet for them to make their escape as planned, but then they had known it was a risk. "—so I'll tell you where Han Solo is — free — gratis! He's with the bounty hunter; you're here in this room, and someone is going to pay for all this!"

"Now, Jabba, if you waste us, where will the money come from?"

Jabba the Hut sighed deeply, fingered a morsel of particularly offensive fragrance and appearance from one of the dishes, munched on it reflectively before answering.

"Some things," the Hut observed, "are actually worth more than money — even to me. You'll tell me where the money is, don't worry. And even if you don't — I'll get my money's worth out of you, don't worry about that either. Pianeff? Chepl? Sailla?"

"Wait!" Lando yelled. Things were looking a little uncomfortable. Where the hell was his diversion? He'd

paid the param well enough to call the stats in; the story he'd given the param was bound to be effective, so what was holding his diversion up? "I wouldn't be so hasty, Jabba, really I wouldn't. I've got friends in places you don't even know about—"

"I know everything I need to know about you, Calrissian," Jabba interrupted serenely. "Oh, yes, I know who you are. The bounty hunter said you'd be along. Your reputation precedes you: you're a gambler, and a good one, but this time you're bluffing with—"

And then the sound of blaster fire in the streets mixed with the welcome commotion Lando had been waiting for. He would never have imagined he would be so glad to hear that shouted word of warning that galvanized the Hut into sudden action—

"Stormtroopers! Scramble!"

The guards were stunned, confused for just long enough. Lando and Chewbacca, who had been prepared for this, expected this, experienced no such hesitation. All it took was an instant for the Hut to press a stud, activate some kind of mechanism, begin to move: Chewbacca and Lando were watching Jabba's moves, not listening to the furor in the street, and they were past the gross bulk of Jabba the Hut and out into the back alley before the well-disguised exit had even fully opened.

In the noise and confusion it was simple to get away. There was no further profit in stealth over speed, so they stole a handy speeder and were out to the docking bay — locked, loaded — and into hyper with a swift efficiency that confirmed Lando's proud boasts about the Millennium Falcon's speed.

"So what've we got?" Lando asked rhetorically. He was proud of this one, he was. Calling in Jabba the Hut's headquarters as a hotbed of rebel activity was truly a masterstroke. If it hadn't worked, if the attack had come too late, if Jabba had moved his always-temporary headquarters to another location... But it had worked, and Lando was not one to brood over near-escapes.

//Skyseer having being saying this might happen-
ing, // Chewbacca commented. //It being contacting Al-
liance intelligence we being next.//

"Sky—" Lando was momentarily confused. "Oh. Skywalker, Chewbacca, not Skyseer— hey, don't get angry. Call him whatever; I don't care. All we have to do now is find the Slave I, and then— what do we do then?"

//Outbidding the other buyers, // Chewbacca prompted.

"Yeah, I guess it'll work. Boba Fett wants the money and the Empire doesn't want Han...not as much as we do, anyway. It had better work. Stand by, I'll call Skywalker."



See-Threepio — human relations cyborg, protocol droid — was having a difficult time, and was willing to complain to any droid that would listen. Too much confusion, too many adventures — and R2 had deserted him again. No, not deserted, he knew the word was wrong; why, it smacked of hurt feelings, and 3PO had been told often enough that droids had no business with feelings. Artoo had simply accompanied Master Luke on — on another adventure. Well, if Master Luke was going to insist on having adventures, it was just as well that

R2 went with him. Artoo was not very cautious by nature — perhaps a malfunction incurred during one of their too-many recent adventures — but at least R2 would help keep Master Luke out of trouble.

And, of course, he — C-3PO — had responsibilities of his own right here with the temporary headquarters unit. Mistress Leia was being every bit as difficult as R2 — in a human sort of way, of course. And try as he would, 3PO simply could not keep up with her. At this very moment, in fact, he was following her down yet another catwalk-corridor, carrying her pocket-handkerchief. When she'd gotten the signal, she'd dressed so quickly that she'd forgotten it; and how could she possibly be properly dressed without a pocket-handkerchief? Threepio caught up with her in the central communications room.

"No, Lando, Luke's off on a mission. What's your status?"

Oh, so that was why she'd been in such a particular hurry. It was a matter of Master Solo. Such an unpleasant man — but important to Threepio's humans, to judge from events. Threepio understood: Artoo could be very unpleasant at times, too.

"Yes, I see. Reports indicate — wait." The princess — her trousers not quite bloused into her grabsoled boots, her cuffs still unstrapped, her hair not yet quite pinned up from the previous evening's unaccustomed luxury of a warmwater soak — turned to one of her technicians as 3PO came closer. "Luke put out a compset on the bounty hunter's vessel — Slave I — before he went. Do we have any marks on it yet? Yes? Right. Thank you." She turned back to her receiver. "He seems to be headed for the freetrading colony at Godu. Are you getting the stats on his course? Good. He's apparently dropped hyper for every major system en route: three so far; two more before he should reach Godu. What's that?" Threepio could only hear her side of the conversation; she had the headset on. "No, nothing like that. There hasn't been much of an Imperial presence in that sector. We have the resources. They seem to have fallen back to the commissary at Ranillo. You've got the entire signal? Fine. Good luck. Transmission complete." She switched off the receiver, tore the headset from her head with what 3PO seemed to remember had meant impatience before. "Nothing," she swore. "Nothing."

Threepio looked at the others in the room for some sort of explanation for this. One of the generals, entering, obligingly provided it for him.

"You've heard from Calrissian, Princess?" the general — 3PO remembered Dodonna from before — asked sympathetically. "What news?"

She sighed, stood up, turning to face him with her arms folded in front of her as if to protect some internal discomfort from escaping. "Oh, it's nothing. We really didn't expect immediate results, did we?"

"Captain Solo is a good pilot," Dodonna said comfortingly. "And a good fighter, and a leader. The Rebellion will profit from his release. And I'm anxious to have him back, too." Threepio thought about explaining to Dodonna that Mistress Leia's feelings were perhaps more personal than military in Captain Solo's case, but the conversation was proceeding. He would have to explain things to the general in private at some later date.



"Is the Hoth base safely relocated now?" she asked abruptly. "Or did Imperial forces relocate after Bespin?"

"An odd thing about that, Princess," Dodonna observed, taking her arm, turning to walk with her out onto the temporary catwalk that spanned one of the fearsome abysses of this cavern-base. "Our reports indicate that most of the fleet under Darth Vader has remained at Bespin. Oh, they sent some cruisers back to reinforce the holding party at Hoth, but pursuit of our troops has been haphazard. It would be more understandable if Bespin had been a base — then this curious inactivity would mean analysis of abandoned information. As it is..." his voice trailed off as he pondered several possibilities.

"As it is — well, it's hard to believe of Darth Vader, but perhaps even he is capable of indecision. Our job, General, is to take advantage of this seeming lull; who knows how long it may last."



"Do you have any particular reason for proposing this maneuver, Admiral?"

Piett could not help being a little nervous. Better men than he had felt the same when faced with the so-obvious irritation of the Dark Lord Vader. But he held his ground manfully; candor had served him well before, perhaps it would work again.

"Morale, sir. Your extended analysis of our campaign is creating an undesirable appearance of command indecision—"

"You are suggesting I am unaware of the results of

my actions?"

"No, my lord. I am offering my professional opinion on a possible interim solution. There has been increased rebel activity in the Chela system; your own intelligence net has reported it. Our campaign against Hoth was not as successful as you yourself would have wished, my lord. You made no secret of your displeasure."

"Indeed." Admiral Piett thought the word was rendered with a dry sort of humor, but it wouldn't do, he reminded himself, to fall into the trap of attempting to second-guess Lord Vader.

"This frustration is shared by the fleet. General Veers is well occupied in Bespin — but as for the rest of us, my lord...we would be grateful for an opportunity to kill rebels. Our duty—"

"Chela," the Dark Lord interrupted, musingly, as if he were talking to himself. "Chela." He nodded his great black-helmeted head; then raised his voice to speak to Piett again. "Yes, Admiral. You may order the fleet to Chela. Preliminary search patrols should be sent to the Feren system before we pass through. To Chela."

"Thank you, my lord!" Admiral Piett saluted, bowed briskly, but Lord Vader had already turned away, to resume the slow pacing that had occupied the majority of his time since they'd rejoined the fleet after leaving Bespin.

Admiral Piett did not let himself become downcast over this apparent lack of interest, of initiative, on his superior's part. The fleet had been ordered to Chela. Now at least they had something to do.



Leia.

That was the word.

He let it run through his mind, rolled the sound over and over in his head, resting from the effort of pulling its components together together to make a word.

Leia.

But now that he had the word — why was it important? What did it mean?

He felt the ache again, the ache that had kept him so long from finding the word, the ache that seemed to signify that he was thinking too hard. An apparently stray thought presented itself: using too much energy.

He thought about that, too; it seemed to be a very important concept, but he couldn't quite remember why, and he knew that if he reached too eagerly for the significance of either the word or the phrase, the ache would become a pain that would keep him from profitable consideration of the problem. Much as he regretted it, it was necessary to choose between the two questions; and so he chose the word, and simply watched it in his mind's eye.

Gradually the idea behind the word began to come to the forefront of his crippled consciousness. A young woman. A short young woman. The image began to coalesce. Brown hair, brown eyes. Leia? Of course. Leia, the woman he loved. But — who was he? If he had discovered the name for her, what was the name for himself? The ache began again, to terminate his troubled attempts at investigation of that question. Leia. He loved Leia. He was quiet in contemplation of her; and his mind was untroubled once again.



His entry coordinates were approximate at best, he had no real hope of Artoo's locating the correct spot, and his willingness to sense through the Force had been badly shaken for a time. But he knew he had to get back to Dagobah, to Ben, to Master Yoda. He had questions to ask; there were so many of them, unanswered, almost perhaps unanswerable.

The feel of his X-wing was some comfort to him, and Artoo's encouraging chatter did serve to lift his spirits a bit. So that while he still remembered the icy numbness that had all but crippled his will — that overpowering feeling of helplessness, of hopeless confusion — he only remembered it, now. He was doing something about this incomprehensible situation. He was going to see Master Yoda. There was so much he had to know, so much he had yet to learn. Perhaps the certainty he had felt on Bespin — the conviction that he could do nothing; that he was at the mercy of his destiny; that he had no control over what he did or what became of him — had been part of the lure of the dark side of the Force. It had tempted him to surrender, to submit — and become an instrument of despair and destruction. Certainly it had shared no part in the passivity that Yoda had tried to teach him: the passivity of a Jedi knight, the receptive compliance with the mandates of the Force. No, what had tempted him was the passivity of denial of responsibility, rejection of personal accountability, surrender of

his convictions and his reason in order to serve the amoral passions Vader had so skillfully evoked.

That Vader had played upon his weakness Luke did understand: oh, he longed so for his father, longed to be able to go to his father and embrace him...but first he had to understand. How could he ever accept that Darth Vader — Dark Lord of the Sith — was his father? Was Luke to embrace the dark side? It would have been so easy, so pleasant; the best solution to all his troubles...but that solution put him in opposition to all he believed in, the Alliance among the rest of the ideals he had placed his faith in; and something in Luke Skywalker's desert-raised Tatooine spirit greatly distrusted any easy way out of problems of any sort. His experience in life had been that the easy way was almost invariably the wrong way, the worst possible way.

The turbulence of Dagobah's upper atmosphere shook him free from his concentration even as his small craft shook in the gales and the irregular counter-air pockets that made entry to Dagobah so difficult. No more time to think, no time to ponder on whether or not he was where he needed to be in order to land where he had before. Luke Skywalker fought for control of his craft, and sank into the misty sensor-fogging atmosphere of Dagobah.



The impact came sooner, more sharply than he had expected; he sat almost stunned for a long moment, the force of the collision with Dagobah not quite entirely cushioned by his craft's construction. He heard R2 chittering from behind him, anxiously; it was another long moment before he answered. "I'm all right, Artoo. We're just not where I expected to be, that's all." Bit of an understatement, he added privately. He checked the comps: yes, the air in this place was safe to breathe. He opened the top of the X-wing carefully, and, rising slowly, had a look around.

Much to his disgust, he had landed in the water again; or, at least, in liquid. His first impression was of the ferocious teeth that surrounded him, blocking out the sun; then he realized that the teeth were cliffs, free-standing as well as ranked in one great wall in front of him, and that the sun was hidden not by the rocks but by the very sky. It was very bright, really; light from Dagobah's sun diffused in the luminous gases of the upper atmosphere to form a ceiling that hung low and oppressive, glowing over the rock in heavy pale grey masses. Luke could hardly suppress a shudder — he felt so trapped by it all, as if the clouds at any moment were going to fall on him and smother him. They were certainly low enough. As he watched, the wind drove one great mass of cloud against the jagged tower of one of the free-standing spinelike cliffs, and Luke could see how the cloud tore against the rock and streamed away like a weeping veil. This was strange, this place.

His X-wing itself had come to rest between two much smaller rocks, the greater part of it fast buried in the black sand. A beach. He was on a beach. Leia had told him about beaches, he'd learned about them at school. The sea he'd learned to swim in on Tatooine was also sand, so fine a sand that it ran as liquidly as water, but this beach had real water. Not too far off in the middle distance behind him he saw what Leia had described to him as breakers, the water itself black beneath the sullen sky. He had read that such a phenomenon was referred to as 'whitecaps' on more watery

worlds than Tatooine; well, this sea had dark green-grey caps, then. And it wasn't warm.

"Stay here a minute, Artoo," he told the patient droid, and climbed out of the cockpit. He couldn't camp in the X-wing all night; he had to decide whether he was going to make camp in this weirdly beautiful place or dig the X-wing out of the sand and try again. There seemed to be a fair expanse of sand ahead; he would go and see if it were suitable for camping. And he didn't want R2 discovering any sink-sand before he did. Artoo was remarkably resourceful, for a droid, but R2 had not been raised on Tatooine.

He walked for what seemed to be a very long time, but the cliffs that had seemed so near got no closer. Either they were much more prominent than they seemed or some trick of the atmosphere skewed his sense of distance. When he turned around to check his progress, he was unpleasantly surprised to find that he couldn't even see the X-wing anymore. The damp black sand so fine beneath his feet carried no imprint of his weight; he could no longer tell exactly from which direction he'd come. He'd been heading toward the cliffs, but which cliffs? The great wall of knife-edged rock arced nearly half a circle before him.

"All right, Han," he said. He wished he had the Corellian with him; Han had told him once that Corellians couldn't get lost. This would have been a perfect chance to test the adage.

His voice sounded curiously flat in his ears. He yelled. "Artoo? Artoo!" He felt as if he were shouting into something spongy. "Artoo! Can you hear me?"

Something did. A small movement on the flat surface of this strange black beach caught Luke's eye. A darker crescent rose, flat from the sand as if the horns were hinges, the full edge facing Luke and rising; then the crescent grew no thicker, though it continued to rise, and Luke realized he was watching a lid or ground door of some sort opening. He stood as still as he could manage, waiting. Odds were that whatever was beneath that ground door wasn't friendly.

A thin black branch poked tentatively out into the grey-shrouded sky; a flexible extensor, hinged or branched in series. The tip tapped along the sand in front of the now-open crescent. Luke stared, his heart beginning to pound. Whatever it was he didn't think he liked it, it looked too much like—

He hadn't noticed any life before, but now a winged creature flew across his field of vision from the left, and dropped something from one of its three grasp-handed limbs as it flew. Luke saw it land about as far away from the exploring tapper as Luke stood, but to his left. Immediately the black branch shifted, the crescent opened further, and the monstrous obscenity that lay beneath the ground door began to creep its horrible dead-branch limbs across the sand toward that dropped object.

Luke stood his ground for a dreadful time of unknown duration, rooted to the spot in horror. He'd seen such beasts before — or beasts like it — on Tatooine; on Tatooine they had called them sand-spiders. Twice as tall as a tall humanoid, their limbs composed of several autonomous segments ruled by the pulsating sac central to the eight or twelve limbs, they roamed in colonies. But on Tatooine, the entire creature was never seen above-ground, unless it was the carcass of a dead one

before the Jawas got to it. The brain-sac was gelatinous, and could not afford to lose the moisture that exposure to the dry desert air would entail by day or night on Tatooine. They were horrible. And this one was alive, and Luke was practically on top of it. Here was the brain-sac, its primitive multiple 'eyes' floating at random just beneath the transparent membrane. Sure it had seen him; surely he looked like prey to it—

Luke's blaster was in his hand, aimed and ready to fire, before he was really aware of it. He had to kill it: it was ugly, it was horrible, it turned his stomach just to see it. And then, just short of obliterating that grotesque sac with the blaster, Luke paused, hardly knowing why. It was ugly, but did he have to kill it? It hadn't assaulted him — but it would, how could he get away if not by killing it?

Luke stood and sweated in fear for several breaths, his blaster shaking in his terrified hand. The creature's limb found what the flying creature had dropped, and tapped whatever it was on the black sands for a bit, finally discarding it. Several of the limbs cast about the sand then in what seemed to a vague curiosity; Luke saw several of the creature's eyes float past the bulging sac in his direction, he was certain the sand-spider had seen him. He had to kill it, those gross branch-like limbs could detach at will, and snake around him to paralyze him more quickly than he could hope to run.

But what was it Master Yoda had said? Luke took a deep breath, counting, then let it out slowly. As he repeated the exercise he seemed to become aware of the sand beneath his feet not as a firm surface, but as a soft and spongy one; Luke concentrated on the sensation. You don't feel anything on the sand, Luke addressed the horrible thing mentally. There is nothing here. Go back into your tunnel and wait.

The branch-like limbs were coming closer, closer, to him, and he took his courage in both hands and holstered his blaster. He stood functionally defenseless on the sand, and let himself become as one with that strange landscape: the heavy-clouded sky, the constant breeze, the tall standing rocks, Luke Skywalker. The limb nearest him tapped uncertainly, and — retreated. Luke closed his eyes and sensed the sand, the sea. When he opened them again, there was no sign of the monstrous horror, and Luke walked forward across its very trap-door without fear of any further threat. He knew that feeling of unity — he had learned to experience it with Master Yoda; he had experienced it even before he came to Dagobah. And now he had made it work for him, had used it to prevent the distortion of this place's field which butchering the primitive intelligence would have caused. He had done it in Master Yoda's Jedi passivity, used that passivity in the Force to turn away the threat before killing violence became necessary. He had taken an important step, he thought.

But he had nearly soiled his clothing in fear, too. Luke walked on a little way, sat down on a rock. He needed a rest, and badly. He'd lost his X-wing, and R2 with it; small good as a Jedi could he do his friends if he were marooned here. What next—

"Where would you be," he asked himself aloud, "if you were a droid with an X-wing?" The sound of his own voice was comforting; this place was too quiet. At the same time, it sounded curiously hushed or garbled to Luke, and he realized that there was a sussuration of water quite near, so regular, so gentle he hadn't really

noticed it before. He thought he could identify a general direction for the sound, and started for it. He found himself climbing an incline; looking back, he realized he had walked into a very gently sloping basin, whose featureless edges and almost imperceptible slope had fooled him — and he a son of Tatooine! Of course, he should have realized what had happened. Such blind-dishes were common enough on Uncle Owen's own farm.

Luke spotted a taller rock in his general direction of travel, and diverted to climb it. Perhaps a vantage point would help... The rock was taller than Luke by several times over, but not too difficult to ascend. Luke had barely reached the point half-way up the face of it when water spilled over the edge of the basin, rinsing the sand down. Luke saw then that the edge of the blind-dish was defined by the same black rock that was ubiquitous to this landscape, and saw also that the horizon before him now was water as far as he could see.

Well, if the tide was coming in, wouldn't that float his ship off the rocks? Luke climbed to the top of the rock and perched there. He had two problems to consider: the present location of R2 and the ship, and whether or not this rock he was on would still be above water when the immense tide-flats were drowned. He scanned the forward horizon anxiously. What was that; could it be his X-wing? Luke thought perhaps he saw it bobbing aimlessly in the water, but it was always disappearing behind the surf, and he couldn't be certain that his eyes weren't deceiving him. Did he dare try to swim out to it? He could indeed swim — in sand; but this water would doubtless offer a different resistance to his swimming, he'd have a different buoyancy, and he'd be swimming against a tide that was coming in so swiftly and strongly that the cold grey waters were already licking at his feet. Luke shivered. He didn't want to go out in that.

He couldn't see what he had thought was his X-wing any longer, and the water was still rising at an alarmingly fast rate. And then, as if to compound his problems and increase his misery, something bumped him quite suddenly from beneath, unseating him all at once. Luke fell headlong into the water.

For a moment he splashed and flailed around wildly, trying to orient himself, trying to get and keep his head above water. By the time he was stable enough to look among the waves for the rock he had perched on, it was nowhere to be seen.

He cast about in several directions, hoping to find that the rock had merely been covered over by water. He found nothing but more liquid, and tread water clumsily, fighting to stay on an even keel while considering which of several inventive expletives would be suitable for this occasion. None Luke could remember were really strong enough — not even the ones he'd learned from Han. But it was impossible not to make some comment on the situation; and so Luke yelled, at the top of his lungs. "Perdition!" It was one of Uncle Owen's favorites. It didn't begin to express his true feelings, but yelling helped, so Luke yelled again. "PERDITION!" This time he was rewarded with a face-full of water, as an errant wave caught him unawares. Luke sputtered and coughed and blinked his eyes to clear them.

He heard it before he saw it, a black-and-white shape, roughly triangular, bobbing up and down in the water even as he himself was. Luke was certain it was laughing at him — but what was it? He blinked again. The water kept on running down out of his bangs and

swamping his vision while the creature laughed harder, rocking back and forth and all but clapping its stubby side-fins together in amusement.

It was obviously aquatic, from its mastery of water, and, of course, its fins. The triangular shape Luke had perceived was revealed as the upper portion of the creature's body, apparently perpendicular in the water. What the rest of it looked like, Luke had no way of telling. He could guess it had a tail with flukes, and more fins for navigation and propulsion. It had a face that was oddly appealing, for all the grim ferocity of the double line of teeth that were bared when it opened its mouth; its jaw was elongated, its eyes fixed at either side of its face instead of in front. It had to turn its head sideways to look at Luke, but every time it tried, it simply dissolved in what seemed to be convulsive hysterics. Of course, Luke told himself, it didn't have to be hysterics, amusement, laughter. Maybe the high-pitched 'laughing' he heard was a war-cry, or a dinner-call. But he felt no threat from this strange creature, only amused — affection; and so instead of thinking in terms of flight, he scowled at the creature and swore aloud.

"What do you think you're laughing at, you slick-skinned—"

But before he had a chance to finish, it interrupted him. Luke stared, seeing no sign of articulation to its jaw, no apparatus for producing speech that he was even vaguely aware of; and still the words could not be denied.

"At you, drowned rodent, at you! Oh, that such children should swim my seas..."

"You live here? — Have you seen my ship? an X-wing, do you know what that is? Only it's probably sunk by now—"

"Ship will wait, your droid will wait. Not to worry. You will come with me, drowned-rat Jedi. Here, grasp my dorsal fin."

"Wait! Where are we going?"

"To my warm-water place, drowned rodent, to my shelter. Come along! No argument! I have to talk to you about your father."



The princess wondered idly why all command centers looked alike. Their actual location seemed immaterial; three standards after occupation it was impossible to tell one base's nerve-center from the last. The same tense worn tired faces, the same patient equipment, the same bits and remnants of people's meals scattered haphazardly on seats and ledges. Still, the signal coming through on one of her comps was enough to lend quite an unaccustomed air of buoyant optimism to the area, something they'd had little of since they'd lost Han Solo.

"—Lando Calrissian!" The signal finally locked through system static, and the exuberant tones of the scoundrel rang happily across the room. Leia smiled, but toned the signal down a bit. Lando Calrissian, all right. And sounding as pleased as possible about it.

"Princess, we're almost there. Nothin' to worry about but Jabba the Hut. We had to stop at each of Fett's ports-of-call, of course; make sure he hadn't dumped his cargo — m'man's a little too hot to handle.

No buyers. None of my old associates want to touch the deal 'cause now the Hut's out for Boba Fett. And none of Han's friends can afford him. All we've gotta do now is catch Boba Fett — before Jabba does. And I think I told you: there isn't a ship in space that can touch this baby—"

"When her hyper's intact," Leia broke in. "Glad to hear it, Lando. I'm giving you to Mgron; she's got some stats for you—"

"Hey, Princess! didn't I tell you we were on him?" But Leia gave the comp to Mgron, despite Lando's protestation. They took enough chances by necessity; there was no reason to take needless ones with Han. Close on the mark, were they? She didn't know whether she was glad, because Han was nearly rescued; or more frightened than ever, in case something should go wrong at the last minute. She couldn't afford to think about it, and if she started to think about it, she'd spend all her time in daydreams she could ill afford. She'd rationed herself sternly in the days following their loss of Han on Bespin — two daydreams per diem, at rising and at sleeping. She could not be changing the rules now.

She needed something to take her mind off this communication, something to recall her attention to her duties. "General Raher?" she called, and the old war-scarred felix turned her head and came to stand with Leia in an alcove. "What's the news on the movements of the Imperial fleet?"

"We can expect action within another few days, Princess. The odd thing is—" The felix paused, as if trying to articulate the thought clearly in her own mind before translating and relaying it. "The odd thing is that it's taken Vader's fleet this long to reach even the outskirts of the Chela system. There've been scouts and reconnaissance-craft patrols, and even a few raids; and per your instructions we have yet to respond to provocation. As you know, we need only a little more time to consolidate before we can begin to hit their supply lines—"

"—and destroy the commissary at Ranillo, among others." Leia smiled and nodded her satisfaction. "What was decided at Staff this morning?"

"We're going to feint at the scouts from Permangam. We get to start as soon as the Imperial fleet crosses the Stante-Arnin perimeter...excuse me, Princess; this requires my attention."

Leia nodded, and picked up her half-empty cup of sweet spiced liquid. It was cold, but she hardly noticed; her mind was full of the latest plan of campaign.

The fleet had allowed itself to become more dispersed than usual for a fleet maneuver. And it seemed clear, now, that they were going to make a run through Chela. Which meant that as soon as the last of the fleet had entered the system — about the time the first few vessels were due to pass systemcenter — the Imperials would be just rightly positioned to suffer a truly classic ambush. The Alliance's forces were nearly in place; they all had their instructions. The princess and the rebel generals all knew too well that they did not have the resources to mount a pitched battle, and certainly not enough to challenge the military might of the Imperium — the military might that had founded the Imperium — dead on. But they could eat away at the edges of that splendid war machine, eat away at it for years on end if that was what it took, until the fleet was so weakened it could no longer support the Empire.

And the Empire would fall. The rebels would wage a war of attrition, a coward's war, a hide-behind-the-moon sort of war, and — as rebel depredations grew more and more effective — the Empire's demands on its subject worlds would grow more and more onerous, and more world-families would grow rebellious and uncooperative. More and more police forces, using harsher and harsher repressive methods, would be required to hold it all together; and the Empire would collapse of its own weight, destroyed by its own excesses. She knew it would happen. It might not happen while she lived, but it would happen.

Leia had studied her history well; her father had made certain of that, tutoring his daughter himself during the long years that had followed the death of Leia's mother and the subsequent loss of Organa's power in the councils of Alderaan. Princess by birth, but Senator by traditional election, Leia's mother had been the third Organa princess to hold the title of First Citizen of Free Alderaan; and with the princess dead, her daughter-heir an infant, the Imperial sympathizers that were well supported by off-world funds had been able to force a break of tradition and elect a non-Organa to the Stateholdership. But her father had been patient, had retired with every appearance of good grace to the family estates; and her father had raised her to deliver Alderaan and destroy the Empire's political power by coalition or force of arms. The first part of Leia's two-fold mission — the deliverance of Alderaan from off-world interests and control — had begun when the turning of public opinion against the Imperial-supported Stateholder had resulted in a minor revolution and Leia's election to her traditional title of Stateholder. That had been when she was fourteen, and confirmed the bit of doggerel that had been so widely circulated in Leia's infancy: "Though our Princess is but small, she'll be a Stateholder after all."

Well, that had been then. Alderaan, of course, had later been delivered of its existence by the Grand Moff Tarkin. Leia could not hope to accomplish the first task she felt charged with. But the Empire could be destroyed; the Empire would be destroyed. The Force had sent her a Jedi to replace the one she had lost in Obi-wan Kenobi; Leia knew that Luke would remove Darth Vader, possibly even the Emperor. And if not — how much could even the Emperor accomplish without a fleet? The Force was capable of many things, but without its living instruments not even the dark side of the Force would be enough to permit retention of control over the civilized worlds of the known galaxy. And the lesson of history was that the Imperial fleet — so recently consolidated, dependent for its leadership on too few mortal beings — could be destroyed by attrition.

The princess knew that she could be destroyed by simple process of attrition as well. The sights she'd seen while prisoner on the Death Star had done much to weaken her; and the subsequent loss now of two people with whom she had become almost unwillingly involved, Luke Skywalker and Han Solo, had literally staggered her. She knew she could still function, but she deliberately removed herself from the vital planning of the Alliance campaigns. Her withdrawal was purely temporary, she knew, but she felt that she might fail beneath her burdens at any time, and the Rebellion could not afford to have her in a position of responsibility when she did fail. Han was prisoner, she had no real reassurance that they could find him; and Luke had a lonely, a solitary path to walk toward the final confrontation with Darth Vader that she knew Luke sought. They had both gone away from her, deserted her perforce, before she had had

a chance to begin to sort out the true nature of her feelings about them; gone from her precisely when she needed their support more than she could afford to admit. Their separate destinies might well mandate that they would never see each other again. It made for personal complications that rendered Leia's life increasingly unhappy. She wanted Han; she wanted him violently and passionately and dreadfully. She needed Han; she had to have him back. She had to.

But she had also half-discovered that she was in love with Luke...



There was something terribly wrong with his thinking.

He remembered — vaguely and with difficulty — but he did remember that the process of thinking was not supposed to cost him this much effort, this much trouble. What had happened to him? What could be the matter? It was terrible, this straining at the unaccustomed restraints of his own mind. It was more terrible than anything he thought he remembered, but he couldn't be certain because he couldn't quite remember.

Was he dead? Was this some torture he had to suffer, for whatever unknown reason there might be? He could not tell. He could only strain his aching brain to remember, to remember, to try desperately to remember...



Lord Vader sat, meditating with something dangerously close to panic.

He had lost Luke Skywalker, lost him entirely, and the Emperor would be waiting for his report, anxious to hear his progress. Vader had no progress to report — apart from young Skywalker's apparently phenomenal growth in the Force. Skywalker had dueled with him, Lord Vader, and in spite of Skywalker's critical mistake — taking the offensive — the boy had not fallen either to Vader's own superior skills and power in the Force or to the most persuasive of half-truths. Now Skywalker was — gone. Vader had sensed him for a while, followed him empathically through the bond forged that moment in the gantry tower where he had accepted Vader's statements as true, and accepted a certain measure of Vader's authority as just. But Skywalker had vanished from Vader's psychic map as completely — no, not as completely as if he had never existed; there was a trace, a ghost in the Force in Skywalker still to be detected in Vader's searching. But if Vader's too-great confidence in his own powers had led to the permanent loss of this young Jedi — if the Emperor were to know — there would be punishment for Darth Vader, punishment of a sort unique to those who had bound themselves over to the manipulations of the dark side of the Force, punishment uniquely horrible. Darth Vader, as completely trapped in his chosen path as unnaturally sustained by it, knew what punishment would be his, and was afraid. He had to find Skywalker, find him before the Emperor could take him to task for this uncertainty as to Skywalker's whereabouts. For at least one thing that Vader had told Skywalker was the truth: the Emperor had foreseen that Luke Skywalker would destroy him.

The actions of Vader's subordinate officers, the maneuvers of the fleet, were trivial to him in comparison to the importance of finding Skywalker before his master

knew to punish him. And so, increasingly, Lord Vader left the operation of the fleet to Admiral Piett and spent more and more of his time in the deepest meditation he could achieve — searching ever, searching always, for Luke Skywalker, intent always on locating Luke Skywalker and divining his actions. If they — if he — did not find the son of Skywalker soon, before Skywalker had a chance to grow and gain his true stature in the Force, the Emperor would be destroyed after all, and Darth Vader would surely fall, either with the Emperor or at the Emperor's hands — so how important was the fleet, in the end? The military might of the Imperium was a tool, but it was a tool that was of no use to Vader in this. And so Vader ignored the fleet, all but discarded it from his calculations. The fleet waged war with the rebel Alliance, but Luke Skywalker was, at least for now, no longer with the rebel Alliance, and Lord Vader really did not care any more whether the fleet destroyed Organa's insurrection so long as he — Lord Vader — found Luke Skywalker in time.



Three planetary perimeters off the median axis of the free trading colony of Godu, two small vessels stood just beyond the range of each other's presumed armament, and traded signals.

"Look, bounty hunter, we've got you tight, you can't deny it. Give us credit for a good chase at least."

"I had thought it impossible for you to follow me this far, Calrissian, considering the shape of the wreck you persist in calling a freighter. Speak your piece. I will listen. But I will decide how to dispose of my cargo."

"We know your position, bounty hunter. You're weak. You haven't fueled since Bespin. You couldn't outrun us now if we decided to force the issue—"

"—but I certainly would destroy Captain Solo before you destroyed me. I trust you realize this."

"Then we would destroy you. But I haven't come all this way to make threats, bounty hunter. I came to buy your cargo. Fair and square."

"You're very generous — for a man who lost everything on Bespin. Come now, Calrissian, surely you don't expect me to believe—"

"Believe it. I've got your price, and I've got it in rythrium. Your scanners will confirm that for you."

"...stand by..."

"—?! Have you no faith?" But there was no answer from the smaller ship for several minutes.

"I confirm your cargo of rythrium. I hope you understand: my price is significantly higher than Jabba the Hut's bounty. The cargo is more valuable than even I had thought."

"You know by now how much we're carrying, bounty hunter, unless your scanners are more primitive than they have any business being. Now ask yourself. Are you going to get a better price than—"

A sudden shrill over the communicator, as if the occupant of the smaller craft had raised his voice. "Take the Corellian trash, and be damned to you all!"

Simultaneously, inexplicably, the Slave I emptied itself of what seemed to be every bit of trash and cargo it could jettison.

"What the—" Calrissian began. The ship, lightened to the maximum extent, did what Lando Calrissian had been certain it no longer had sufficient fuel to do: jumped to light speed.

//Fight, answered Chewbacca shortly. //The Hut, //

Lando scanned quickly, caught it on the monitor, and recognized half a dozen vessels, at least two of which were bounty hunters nearly as notorious as Boba Fett's own self.

"Shit, the Hut's determined, ain't he? Can you find Han in that mess, Chewbacca?" The dumped contents of the Slave I were dispersing rapidly, propelled by the inertia of their ejection. Lando knew that if they were going to find the carbon-freezing unit that contained the hibernating body of Han Solo in that garbage pile, they were going to have to do so quickly. He couldn't be sure, of course, the timing was imprecise, but the upper limit that Lando had placed on that unit was fast approaching. If they didn't retrieve the unit quickly, when the life-support systems of that unit brought the sleeping Corellian out of his artificial slumber to full consciousness, Han Solo would wake unprotected to deep space. Chewbacca didn't know about this; Lando had kept it his secret. And there would have been no problem — if Fett hadn't spaced his cargo. Suddenly there was a problem, a critical problem, and no time to explain...

Chewbacca hadn't answered him. Lando didn't know if Chewbacca had been listening to him or not; the Wookiee was apparently absorbed in the problem of the small groups of killers whose appearance had provoked Fett's sudden removal. Lando could understand Chewbacca's caution, could appreciate why he was pushing the power on the screens up and tracking; but if they didn't retrieve Han... Lando knew they didn't have much time. Very well. Chewbacca could deal with the bounty hunters; Lando would at least try to discover which bit of free-floating trash was the carbonite unit that contained Han Solo.

Lando threw himself at an auxiliary comp, cursing Han's idiosyncratic dislike of droids while he did so. It wasn't going to be easy. All Lando had were the comps... They were receiving a transmission.

"—Solo," a mechanical voice was saying. Chewbacca punched the response into the transmission monitor, thus ensuring his answer would be clearly understood, even by beings who didn't speak Wookiee. The formal, comparatively well-bred reply that the computer produced was strangely at odds with Chewbacca's barked vocalizations.

"Captain Solo is not on board at this time."

Hmmm, Lando decided, not there. The nearest clump of debris contained only irregular fragments too small, too light to be what he was looking for. That gave him an idea, and he fed into the auxiliary what information he remembered on the size and mass of the unit he sought to locate.

The transmissions they were receiving now seemed to come from several of the ships, all with basically the same idea in mind.

"Jabba'll pay more for Boba Fett, right now. Did he tell you where—"

"We want that information, Wookiee, or we'll blow you out of the—"

The polite 'voice' of the computer provided a Standard translation of Chewbacca's answer. "I am pleased to inform you that the bounty hunter has not fueled since Bespin. I regret to say he neglected to tell us where he was going."

There were no more transmissions for a moment. Chewbacca watched his scanners, warily, ready for attack when it came. Lando had to wait for the auxiliary computer to process his input, to compare the data he'd given it with all of the debris Fett had had in ballast; every moment carried Han further from them, if Han were out there at all. Lando fought to still his impatience by imagining each of those ships separately calculating how much fuel the Slave I would have been carrying, how much was expended, how much remained, how far the ship could travel in hyper, where Boba Fett would be most likely to touch down.

Then one of the vessels winked out of normal space, followed closely into hyper by two more; then the next and the next, until space was empty again but for debris.

The auxiliary computer was telling Lando that it had the information he wanted.

"There!" Lando yelled. Chewbacca turned to see what he was up to. "C'mon, we've got to pick him up — and fast."

//What being your sudden hurry?// Chewbacca seemed suspicious now that they were close enough to rescuing Han for Chewbacca to be safely remembering his earlier hostility to Lando.

"Chewbacca, that mechanism is pre-set, and he's going to be coming out of it any minute now— hey— you can strangle me later; right now we've got to get out to that piece of space junk. Now!"



The thoughts, the words, the memories began to fill his consciousness ever more swiftly, as if his waking mind were a pool that deepened faster as the volume of its contents increased. Leia. Of course. Leia Organa. The flight to Bespin — Bespin, Lando, Vader — carbon freezing—

The images were coming too swiftly to grasp. He was confused; he couldn't hold more than one thought still enough to look at it. He had been cryogenically frozen in a carbon freezing unit. That was the cause of his confusion, his difficulty in remembering. And now, this sudden urge of cognitive percepts could only mean that he was being returned to normal metabolism; the mechanism was bring him up out of the artificially depressed metabolic state that had kept his body alive/dead, that had dampened the transmission of nervous impulse to where he had lost all but the barest possible hints of proprioception, and had slowed even the very minute metabolism of his thought processes down to the bare minimum. Now he was to breathe again — for whom? friend or enemy? a rescue — or Jabba's vengeance — or what—



It was hard work, tractoring that flat rectangular box through one of the Falcon's side ports and into a sealed cargo hold; what Lando would have done if Han hadn't equipped the ship for deepspace salvage he didn't know. Chewbacca was more careful with the tractor than Lando really thought they had time for, but he had to bow to the Wookiee's superior wisdom: the more the mechanism was bounced off the side hull of the Falcon, the greater were the chances of damaging it — perhaps even beyond functioning. And Lando couldn't help but feel — as he thought Chewbacca might — that, all knowledge of the hardness of the case and the pain-free suspension of Han's hibernation aside, it could not but hurt Han, especially when it was the upper surface of the carbonite shell with its undead mask that jarred against the entry port. But the longer it took, the more certain Lando was that it wasn't going to work, that they'd lost Han already to the vacuum of space, that they'd come all this way to retrieve...a corpse.

Lando was even too worried about Han to speculate on what Chewbacca would do to him if his worst fears were realized. The short time it took for the cargo hold to pressurize seemed like an eternity to Lando; and he waited outside the door, his mind full of grim foreboding, watching the readout above the access panel climb with maddening slowness toward normal.

The minute the airlock was open he was through, with Chewbacca right behind him. The unit lay on one side, and even as Lando turned it face upward, he noted the suspension was growing mushy. The unit was losing power. He checked the readout on the side the unit had been resting on; and if it didn't quite confirm his worst fears, it was bad enough in itself. He'd been right about the timing, the instruments told him Han was being raised to full awareness — but what was the matter with the unit? It was supposed to divide along the top and slide back, but it was still hermetically sealed. It must be jammed! Han was alive, but he was still in there, and he was going to suffocate before Lando's own anguished eyes.

And then, with a smooth hum of machinery, the casing divided neatly down the middle of the top portion; the top halves raised up vertically and slid down along the sides as the suspension cut. Han. Han—awake, alive, and breathing—was all right. Lando let the breath that he had not realized he'd been holding go in sudden and entire relief. His own fears, his own anxiety, had fooled him. The unit had functioned perfectly; Lando's impatient worry had deluded him into miscalculating the sequence. Here was Han, none the worse for the experience, apparently—

With a feeling of peaceful fulfillment, Lando moved to loosen the restraints that still bound Han's arms to his sides. Han was a little disoriented, that was to be expected, and — staring at the ceiling — seemed unaware of Lando's action. But Lando didn't mind. There, that was better; it was unnatural for Han to be bound, to be constrained, to be shut up in a box, and now Lando had undone at least a portion of the evil which, in his ignorance of Darth Vader's plans, Lando had committed. Lando was perfectly happy, just at this moment, to watch the reunion as Chewbacca mauled the Corellian in grateful reassuring embrace. Yes, that was much better.

Now he had only Bespin's fate to worry about.



It was happening too fast; it confused him. One moment the sudden, the stunning awareness of everything that had happened to him on Bespin; the next moment the fearful panic. Something was surely going wrong, he was still encased in his shell, he couldn't move — he couldn't breathe! He was trapped, immobilized! His chest began to ache with his need for air; he could not get out—

—and then, miraculously, air and light and freedom all at once. The top half of his shell lifted from off his imprisoned body, and he could breathe. He could see: Chewie — the Falcon's conduits; he'd recognize that patch-work anywhere. Was he rescued, then?

"Chewie?" Han said, startled to hear his own voice, realizing that of course the carbon-freezing procedure would have so depressed his metabolism that his eyes couldn't know he hadn't seen for however long, his voice couldn't know it should be rusty from disuse. "Chewie — what's goin' on?"

But Chewbacca simply roared some unfamiliar Wookiee joy-word and wrestled him bodily from out of the molded bed of alloy to embrace him ferociously. "Hey. Hey, Chewie, c'mon — I'm glad to see you, too, believe it — Chewie—"

Chewbacca finally heeded Han's soothing, and released him reluctantly; then Han saw Lando. Lando, on board Han's ship, and after all the trouble Lando had put Han to—

"What's he doin' here?" Han snarled.

"Rescuing you, old buddy," Lando replied. "No, I'm on the level, Chewbacca can tell you. Chewbacca, tell him— CHEWIE—"

Han glared up at the Wookiee, suspiciously, for explanations. //He being telling the truth,// Chewbacca assured him. //For once. He and this Wookiee having been hunting after you for fourteen standards and more...//

"How long has it been?" Han exclaimed, startled. "Still... I guess it could have been even longer..."

"Not hardly," Lando admitted. "The mechanism was pre-set. I just didn't know if we were going to find you in time, Han."

"Oh, I knew." Han's blithe assurance was more for form's sake than factual. "After all...if you hadn't... Chewie would have taken you apart. Right Chewie?" Han thought Chewbacca's roar of assent was particularly musical just now. "But you've got to tell me what's been going on—"



Lord Vader had kept to himself for days; the fleet was slowly approaching the Chela system, engaging various targets along the way, and the purely military maneuver did not require his attention. Lord Vader had much thinking to do, much study. It had been too long since his last contact with his master, the Emperor. Vader knew what that meant to him, now. He had hoped to conceal his failures from the Emperor; he had not. For this prolonged silence at this crucial point could only mean that the Emperor was waiting. Waiting to see what

Vader would do, waiting for Vader to justify himself. He must not fail his master. He would not fail.

Lord Vader broke his self-imposed solitude of many days to call for Admiral Piett, to brief the Admiral on what actions the fleet was to take during his absence.

And then Lord Vader took his own special fighter and abandoned the fleet for Dagobah.



Luke Skywalker sat stark naked, squatting on his heels on a rocky shelf, and waited for his clothes to dry. This haven, this 'warm-water-place', seemed to be a great dark cave, lit only by certain, glowing vegetation and a blue luminescence from the depths of the water itself. A volcanic cave, a hot-spring of some sort, there was light enough for Luke to be able to see the steam vents in the living rock that warmed the air and the shelf he sat upon sufficiently to toast Luke's buttocks and the soles of his feet as he crouched. His clothing lay spread flat on the rock-shelf near him; he was watching for the creature that had brought him here, and thinking.

He seemed to have lost a certain amount of control over his life, he reasoned — especially in recent days. He had done nothing on his own that availed him aught since he'd come to Dagobah. The one thing he had done — the one decision he had made — had been really a thing-not-done, a sidestepping, not a direct action. He had not killed the creature that had so terrified him on the beach.

His buttocks were becoming unpleasantly warm; he slipped casually into the warm water and let himself float on his back, steadying himself with one hand against the wall of the ledge he'd been sitting on. He closed his eyes and pondered. No, the last not-decision he had made — the last sidestepping — had been at Bespin, when he'd let himself drop to what he had believed was certain doom. Waving his legs lazily about in the warm and buoying liquid, Luke realized now that he'd been so busy pondering the problem of his paternity that he hadn't stopped to really decide why he'd done that. He thought and meditated and fought it out in his mind. He had resisted Vader's suggestions, he had resisted the suggestion that Vader was his father. Vader had urged him to hate, to be angry; had he resisted that too? Luke cast off a few feet toward a rock that barely broke the water's surface, and rested against it as he considered the problem.

He had not chosen suicide through anger, he could remember that. Oddly enough, in that one moment at least, he knew he had not hated Darth Vader. Nor had he wished — nor had he chosen — to listen to his father's words. Why had it seemed he heard, he listened, later? Had the anger of the body at pain and dismemberment, and the crushing confusion that had come on him, had those made him weaker, somehow, in quite other than the usual sense?

He felt a presence deep beneath him, and turned over in the water onto his belly, leaning over the rock that anchored him, to gaze down into the luminescent depths of this cave-pool. Whatever the secondary weakness had been, Luke knew that at one moment at least — that moment empty of hatred — Lord Vader had held no power over him. Which meant, in turn, that if he could reach and hold that clear-eyed passive state, he could confront, do battle, even destroy the Dark Lord — he could destroy the evil that was his father.

The presence beneath the water rose to the surface quickly, as if propelled from a great depth; the creature breached it, arching the entire length of its piscine body phosphorescent above the waters before diving down again to surface, only partially, near Luke. It was the presence, the creature, that had abducted Luke and carried him to this place by ways Luke couldn't quite remember. Then he had thought it had spoken to him. "Who are you?" Luke spoke the words aloud, but the answer — filtering softly into his brain — was not so much heard as felt.

"I am the one you are to learn from. You will listen and be guided, drowned rodent."

Luke reached a hand out and touched the top of the creature's multi-toothed jaw carefully. It didn't bite. He stroked the rubbery, smooth-molded skin almost fearfully. This time he did not speak; he posed his question mentally. "How do you communicate?"

He heard nothing; waited. After a time, he felt the answering voice. "You must speak to me aloud, young Skywalker. I will put my words in your mind to instruct you; it is the only way I can communicate with one of your landbred hearing. But I will not go into your mind to take your words out. That is not proper respect."

"You can — uh — hear my thoughts?" Of course you can, Luke thought. How else would you have known my name.

"I can...but I do not. Such a thing gives too much power too easily. The pleasure of domination has ruined many Jedi."

Luke pondered this as he idly fanned the water with his hands. "The dark side of the Force?" he asked. He felt he knew better than to ask this aquatic telepath where it got its knowledge — her knowledge — of Jedi.

The whispery answer sounded amused. "Part of the dark side, drowned-rat Jedi, part of it. Pleasure in domination, arrogance of anger, violent and destructive passion — these are of the dark side. And not even your teacher—"

"Master Yoda?"

"Not even your teacher Obi-wan was proof against it, in the end. It is a constant struggle."

Luke struggled to understand, to accept what she was saying. He had so quickly, so completely characterized the creature as female — as motherly, nurturing — that he had passed from thinking of his kidnapper as 'it' to thinking of her as 'she' without conscious realization. He tried out her allegation, rejected it. "No. Ben was a good man."

"Yes." She sounded a little puzzled; as she went on, Luke realized that she was trying to tell him that the purest of spirits could be tainted, could fall to the dark side. "Yes, while he lived here. But all that lives is divided in nature, and all that can feel pain is vulnerable to the evil in the Force." She paused. "Too much thought on a full belly, drowned-rat Jedi. I must go and rest."

She turned from him, and for the first time he saw the multiple lines reticulating on her shiny black-and-cream body, the flexible fan-like grace of her ribbed lateral fins, the extravagant elegance of her flukes. One

of her three pairs of lateral fins was folded in upon itself; as she turned to undulate off gracefully and majestically, that fin unfolded to reveal an apparently lifeless fish or similar creature that drifted on the water's surface toward Luke. Luke caught the fish as it came within reach. It was still flexible, so it was either still alive and just stunned; or it was freshly killed. He held it floating on the water awhile before deciding it was freshly killed. Fine, here was dinner.

He climbed up on to the bit of rock he'd been using as an anchor, threw the fish up in the general direction of his drying clothes, and leapt the short distance up onto his ledge. He had a knife, and he could build a fire. It was rather a large fish and would make quite a satisfactory supper.



The little droid sat perched in its proper place atop the floating X-wing, and chirped unhappily to itself. The seas were growing rough. Fortunately, the droid had been able to convince the ship's computer that the human being would not be back in time to give instructions and the ship was responding to the droid's advice. Now they were temporarily safe from sinking or swamping. But the tide that had floated the ship off the rocks was forcing them closer and closer to the great rock wall, and the droid's sensors could tell well enough from the violence with which the various flotsam and jetsam shattered against the rock that they would need to avoid being carried much further forward on the tide if they were to remain intact until their master returned.



"But if Ben accepted some part of the dark side, how could he fight with Vader? Why—"

"It is of your father." Luke shut up. His clothing was dry; he'd eaten, he'd slept. He had not dressed. The water was warm, and he could rest alongside the great creature and be held by one of her lateral fins as they talked.

"It was the matter of your father. Obi-wan let anger and hatred into his heart when your father was killed."

"My father isn't dead. My father is—"

"You will not repeat that falsehood. It is an irreverence to your father's memory."

"But Vader said—"

"Think. What did Vader say?"

"That he is my father; that we will destroy the Emperor and bring order to the galaxy. It is — destiny. He spoke truth."

"No, only partial truth. It is a good trick, to mix truths with falsehood so that all seems true. It was Obi-wan's love for your father that weakened Obi-wan, and the pain of your father's murder framed his lapse."

"I don't understand what you're talking about. I don't understand at all."

"When Obi-wan faced Darth Vader in the plains above this cave, he came with pain, with anger, with hatred. And because his fury blinded him, he did not destroy

Darth Vader. He could not destroy Darth Vader."

"Master Yoda said the dark side wasn't stronger. How could the Dark Lord be stronger than Ben Kenobi?"

"Kenobi came with violence and anger. But Kenobi was one with the Force. He did not know violence and anger. Kenobi was stronger in the Force. But Vader is stronger in hatred, in violence and anger. And if you come against Darth Vader with violence and anger, you cannot match him, for Vader is master in such. Do you understand me, drowned-rat Jedi?"

"He was winning when I hated him," Luke mused. "And he— he got angry, seemed to lose control of himself when I—" Luke paused, frowning, trying to put his thought into words. She fanned the small waves of warm water across him where he lay with another of her lateral fins.

"Obi-wan could not destroy him," the aquatic Jedi, now Luke's friend, said, "because the pain of your father's death, the betrayal, his own responsibility, still crippled him. To destroy Darth Vader, you must be empty of these un-life emotions. Yoda has told you this."

"A Jedi never attacks," Luke thought aloud, rehearsing Master Yoda's lessons. "A Jedi uses his knowledge to defend, to protect. Passive — how can I destroy Darth Vader if I am passive?"

"You know the feeling, drowned-rat Jedi. You must be empty of aggression, of wish for destruction. You must understand him, accept his existence, even love him. Only then can you destroy him and free the Jedi he was from the Jedi that he is, free this breathing world from the violence of his loss."

"But he is my father!" Luke protested desperately.

His terror that it might be true, that Darth Vader might be his father after all, spurred him paradoxically to embrace the idea he resisted. If he could only accept it, he could come to terms with this unacceptable father.

His father, for whom he had wished all his life; his father, to whom he longed to be a son in fact; his father, for whose love, whose approval he longed also — his father was Darth Vader, the very figure of Imperial evil and oppression, his enemy, the murderer of Ben Kenobi, the man who had tortured his friends. His enemy was his father. His father was his enemy.

"I have told you that that is untrue. The man that sired you is dead. The woman that bore you never lay with Darth Vader."

"I heard the truth in his voice," Luke insisted forlornly.

"You heard the truth of part of what he told you. Did he say he was your father? His actions shaped your life, truly. He is as much your father, perhaps, as Obi-wan, as whoever fostered you. Did he say that you and he were to destroy the Emperor? He spoke partial truth. You alone will do that deed."

As much as Luke wished to accept her words, he could not yet rid himself of the nightmare that insisted that Ben was a liar, that Vader was his father.

"Why are you telling me these things?" he asked miserably. "If my father were a Jedi — not Vader — how

did Vader destroy my father?"

"In the same way in which you will destroy him," she responded serenely. "Darth Vader knew your father, he understood him. He knew your father's weaknesses, he knew why your father lived, what your father lived for. He set himself to understanding until he thought your father's thoughts, till he comprehended your father utterly. Until he almost was your father — and in that sense, again, he spoke truth to you. And knowing why your father lived, Darth Vader betrayed your father's love to gain power, to gain dominion. You must learn Darth Vader, know Darth Vader, understand Darth Vader. Only then can you come against him without hatred, without anger. Only then will you destroy him."

She fanned him away, dove without warning to disappear from sight. Luke floated un-anchored in the warm supportive fluid, no longer uneasy without a handhold; and he pondered.

Firstly, with the blessed relief that awakening to innocent reality from grim nightmare brings: Darth Vader was not, perhaps, his father, after all.

Secondly, he must concentrate on Master Yoda's teaching, clear his consciousness of willfulness and passion; permit himself to be filled, in all passivity, with nothing but the Force; set all his powers of concentration to discerning the proper expression of the Force. Then he could be the instrument of the Force, as Obi-wan had been, as Master Yoda was.

He seemed to sense approval, somewhere in the back of his mind; approval with the flavor of both of his teachers about it. But there was no time to savor that approval.

He had much work to do.



"Well?" Leia pressed for an answer, eagerly. "What does it look like?"

"They're not responding to our attacks, Princess. And we know we're hurting them. It doesn't feel like Vader's doing, at all."

"Why don't they turn back, then?" one of the group leaders asked. "If they're sustaining such damage—"

"We can't be certain whether or not Lord Vader is still with the fleet," the intelligence officer pointed out. "It may be that he hasn't bothered to alter their orders recently. It's happened before, as the Princess will remember, when the fleet was immobilized off Mercarshen—"

"We've got 'em where we want 'em, and we're gonna squeeze 'em good," she said. The humor was grim, but so was their situation. "I think we should stay on them as long and as hard as we can. General, I think we should begin to concentrate on the near flank of the fleet's movement—"

"The near flank, Princess?"

"Look here," Leia explained, illustrating her reasoning with reference to the scanner-board that displayed the position and tracking of the Imperial fleet. "They're in so deeply now that they'll start wondering where we

are. If we concentrate on their near forward flank, they'll think that's where we're coming from."

"That would lead them dangerously close to our real base, if they head off in this quadrant—"

"Why not take their far forward flank?"

"Gentlebeings." Leia called for attention. "The Imperial fleet has at least as much experience as we do to draw from. If we concentrate our attacks on the flank opposite our true heading and someone is suspicious, we've led them right to us. If we take the near forward flank, they'll pass us by with a safe margin, with any kind of care at all on our part. General Semmes can head out and build us a dummy base on — oh, say, Forbel. The only settlements in that immediate area are slavers, no great loss if the fleet shoots first."

"And if they decide we're trying to draw their attention off, they're more likely to choose a far rear flank heading than near rear."

One of her generals nodded. "It's risky — but it will probably work."

"It has a better chance of working than our other alternatives," Leia noted. "We are in a better shape here than we were on Hoth, remember. Now, are there any further questions?"



"Why did you bring me here? Luke knew his voice carried more authority than it had before. He also knew that his question was nonetheless a request, not a demand, for information, and that if not answered, he would decline to force the issue. That temptation of the dark side had no power over him."

"To learn what was necessary," the aquatic Jedi said.

"Where do I go now?"

"Up. Out. The place is far, on foot. I will show you the way."

"Where will it take me?"

"To where your father died. To the place where Lord Vader will come for you."

"What will I do there?"

But if she answered the question at all, it was indirectly only. "Go in the Force, drowned-rat Jedi," she said. She carried him on her smooth serpentine back across the water under the vast vaulted cave roof to a tongue of rock that looked to be the solidified remnant of a liquid rock-flow.

"What am I supposed to do?" he asked; she did not answer. "What do you want me to do?"

Patiently she waited, unspeaking till Luke slid off her back and found his footing on that tongue of once-running rock. He looked along its length; there was a blackness ahead, a cave mouth within the cave, a new passage branching off from the great cavern, a tunnel into the blackness and obscurity. He turned back to her, to thank her for her tutelage, but she was already gone. He stood for a moment, trying to decide what to do.

He was alone, he had no idea where his ship was, whether R2 was safe or swamped by now. He had no notion of how long he'd been in the cave, no idea of how much time had passed since his departure from the Alliance base. The base itself — Leia, his captive friend Han, the cyborg augmentation of his right-hand — seemed curiously distant, unreal. None of that really existed — at least not now, not in this reality. The only truth, the only reality, was Luke standing on an old lava-flow, his clothing wet up to his thighs from riding on the creature's back in a dark warm cave lit only by its luminescent waters; the only future was that dark cave mouth where the lava-spill led.

Luke reached down into the water and seized a handful of the phosphorescent water-plant that provided most of the cavern's light. He held the dripping tendrils of light aloft in one hand, and proceeded into the mouth of the inner cave to meet with, to confront, Darth Vader in the place where his father had died.



It was rough going for Luke Skywalker. The passage was narrow, and the unpredictable outcroppings of rock grasped periodically at his unsuspecting shoulders to bruise him and throw him off balance. He knew he had only the durability of his flight-suit to thank for the fact that his clothing was not yet torn to shreds and continued to protect him. He didn't know how long he had been walking; he did know that the plants he had carried into this tunnel had lost their phosphorescence and been abandoned some significant period of time ago. He was walking in the dark, one hand held out in front of his face to provide advance warning of any blockage or sudden turn; and it was darker than he could have imagined, blacker than any sleep. Luke sensed the weight of rock above him, and it made him uneasy. He didn't know how far beneath the surface he might be. He did know he wished — he wished most strenuously — that he were above the ground once more.

He had been growing more and more uneasy as he progressed. Something, he felt, was lying in wait for him, something within the tunnel itself; what exactly, he couldn't say, but it was certainly something less than pleasant. The tunnel had begun a winding course that seemed to lead generally upward; that was a good sign. Luke rounded a bend that brought him sharply left, then right, then at right angles forward again. Luke negotiated the corner, and found himself without warning face-to-face with Ben Kenobi.

Obi-wan stood hooded in an odd sort of light that did not shine, a luminescence that shed no light on the surrounding cave — or tunnel — rock. "Ben?" said Luke, wonderingly. "Ben, what are you doing here?"

"You mustn't listen to her, Luke," the vision said urgently. "She's a false Jedi, a traitor. Go back, Luke. Go back. Destroy her. It must be done."

"Who?" Luke was confused. "The creature in the cave?"

"She is a weak and brittle weapon, Luke. We cannot afford to let her live. All that she had told you is lies."

"How can I kill her?" asked Luke, his mind reeling from the impact of this sudden and scarcely credible information.

"I will give you the power to summon her, Luke." Luke noticed now that this vision's eyes were strangely shadowed or ringed, the face barely visible beneath the hood. He'd seen Ben in a hood before, but none that hid his face in quite this manner. The vision's words were oddly inflected: full of reassuring familiarity, full of confidence and power, but sounding almost like the vocalizations of a droid that needed its communicator adjusted for speed. "I tell you she has lied to you. You must go back, Luke. She must be destroyed."

Lied to him, had she? And Ben offering him power to destroy her? Luke paused and stilled himself, seeking within the place where his anger at being lied to should have been. That place was empty of anger; calm, he was passive, waiting. He turned his attention outward again to examine this vision that offered him power, the secret lust that could ruin even a Jedi. But when Luke turned his attention — his disciplined, his Force-aware consciousness — to the vision, it was no longer there, had vanished as if it had never existed. Very good. She had not lied to him.

Luke proceeded along his way laboriously. It had been some kind of a trap, certainly. But why Ben's image? Yes, because he had trusted Ben, loved Ben, learned from Ben. Luke pondered. If Vader had known that Yoda had also been his teacher, would he have seen Yoda in the cave instead of Ben? Vader had seemed unaware of Master Yoda's involvement. What had Vader said to him? Obi-wan has taught you well....

Or had it just been a test, a test of Luke's control and knowledge prior to the confrontation the creature had clearly anticipated between Luke and Lord Vader?



Luke had another vision, between his encounter with what he decided was false-Kenobi and the long-sought end of his arduous journey through that nightmare of a tunnel.

This time it was Han. Han, apparently perched on a rock, leaning against the tunnel wall; Han, big as life and twice as cocky, cleaning his nails with his knife. "Hey, Luke," he sneered. "Where d'you think you're going? It ain't gonna get you anywhere. I'm way ahead of you, farmboy." Every syllable was heavy with contempt, mockery. "She's mine. I wasn't gonna bother with her, but...well, I guess I just didn't have the heart to turn her down when she came begging to me. And she swore it was okay, too, if she got pregnant; hey, she'd get you to marry her. Ineffectual child Skywalker. Yeah, that's what she said."

"It's just a vision," Luke said aloud. "An illusion. No truth in it."

"Isn't there?" The image of Han threw back its head and laughed. Luke couldn't help but think that Han looked singularly ugly just at that moment. "But then you don't know everything that happens when you're gone, do you, kid? Kenobi kept that talent from you. Give up, Luke. You're hopelessly outclassed."

Luke stood and considered this simulacrum as it jeered at him. It wasn't too difficult to tell that it wasn't really Han. A possible Solo, yes: one without Han's generosity of spirit, his honesty. Luke shook his head in mild amazement at the image and turned to go.

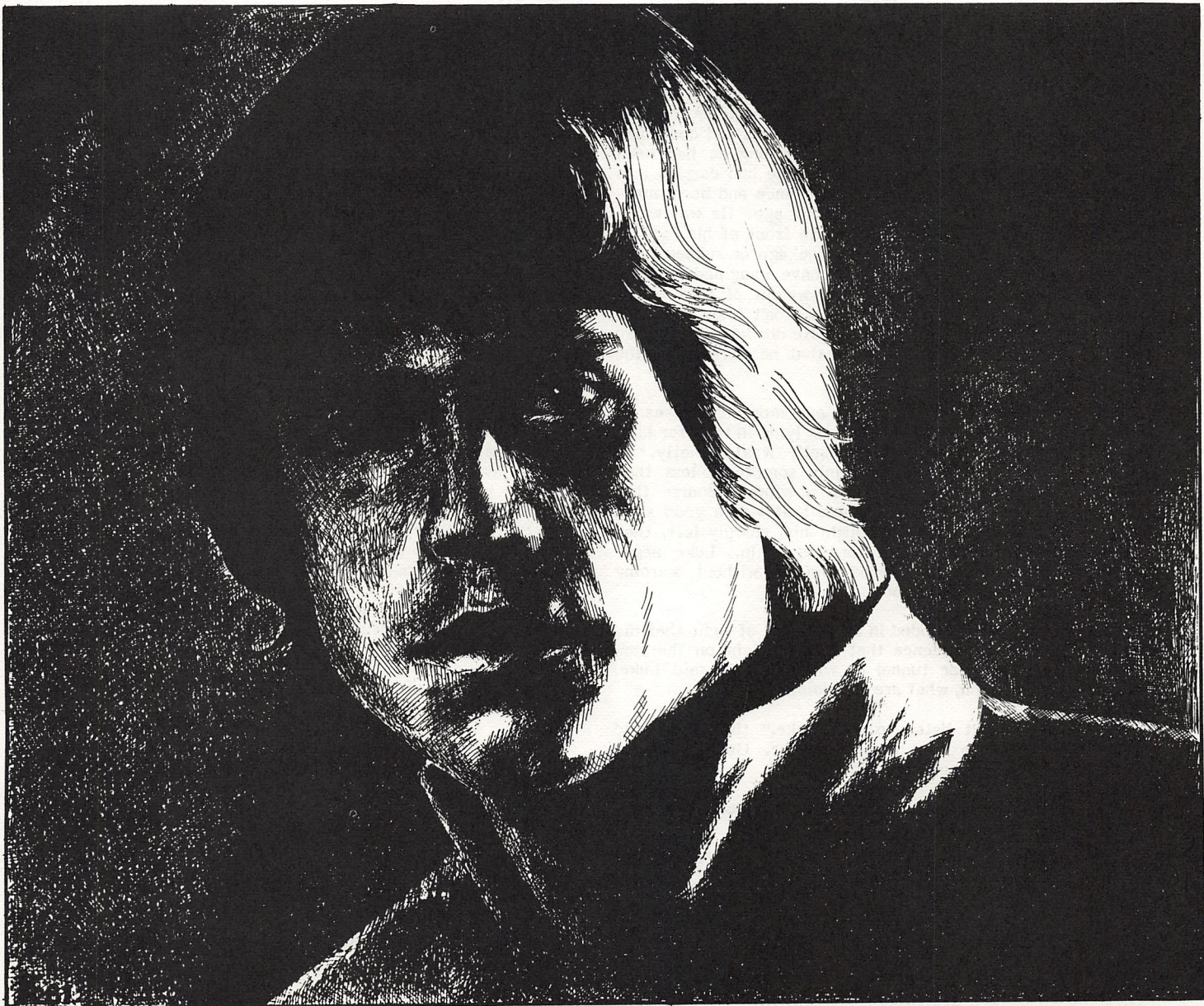
But down just a few more feet of the tunnel he saw Han again, much changed this time. Han lay along the wall, his face white and beaded with sweat, his clothing torn and dark with what might have been his blood. And as Luke knelt to examine this new vision, Han spoke low and piercing words to chill Luke's heart.

"Please," he said. "Please, kid, you gotta help me. You gotta get me back to the cave, Luke. Luke. I'm hurt. They've tortured me for days. Luke, it was more'n I could stand. For you, Luke. They tortured me for you. Help me. You gotta get me back to the cave. I can't stand it here."

Luke touched his hand to Han's face, noted the unreality of the sensation. Yes, it was as he had thought. Whatever it was that waited for him was very anxious

that he not come; or was it perhaps she who was behind, testing him, trying him? It did not matter. If there were evil in this place, it did not hold him now the way the vortex of dark energy that Master Yoda had bade him enter had held him. Perhaps his failure there was no true failure; perhaps in destroying the 'Vader-with-Luke's-face' he had excised and destroyed the weakness within himself. It bore pondering on as Luke stumbled his way forward through the tunnel.

If not the dark side, the very darkness in its unpromising absolute was enough to force nightmare visions on him. Luke walked, and staggered, and sometimes crawled through the horrors of the darkness and the dark side that surrounded him as his eyes, his brain, strove to people the surroundings with images in order to relieve the dreadful and dreadfully complete deprivation of his



sight. He wept sometimes. He shuddered away from the reproachful remnants of his Uncle Owen, his Aunt Beru; he fled in panic terror from fears so deep they were unrecognizable. But all the time, Luke traveled forward. His eyes could not guide him, he understood that. His eyes were deceiving him. Luke closed his eyes; it did not shut the horrors out, but at least it helped him concentrate — and as far as he was able, Luke traveled in the Force, making himself walk upright with his hands at his sides by main force of will.

In time, his knowledge of calming relieved the worst of it; and Luke moved confidently, not blind in the Force as he was blind now in his senses. In time, he became calmer; the horrors of his nightmare visions lost their horror as they gained in familiarity. Luke realized — with a great and sudden relief as profound, as grateful, as the awakening to morning from evil dreams — that Darth Vader was not in fact his father, that he did not feel forced to believe any longer that Darth Vader was his father. It had all been only a part of the clouding by the dark side of the Force: Luke's deepest fears, his deepest insecurities forcing him to doubt even Obi-wan. Obi-wan, to whom Luke had clung in his mind, teacher and advisor and savior, all three. What more horrible thing could there be to afflict his mind, to trouble his ability to choose wisely, than the idea that his own teacher, his advisor, his trusted counselor, was his enemy and had lied to him? What more difficult trial to bear than the idea that his enemy, the being who had tortured his friends and destroyed all Luke had to call family, was in fact his father? A nightmare; and now Luke felt he had awakened from the nightmare, understood what Vader had been trying to accomplish with that lie. It had almost worked, too, Luke felt; had almost brought him so low that he would accept Vader as his father in fact, go to him, obey him and be guided by him.



Luke felt the end of the long tunnel nearing before he opened his eyes to see it. The breeze was neither cool nor fresh, but it was without question a breeze, a current of air. He scarcely needed his eyes to guide him now, blind darkness or no. He went forward with his non-sensory sensing until he felt he stood at the tunnel's very lip.

For several moments Luke blinked in confusion at the scene that confronted him when he opened his eyes. Was he still seeing things? Had his walking in darkness somehow bled the colors from his vision? The world he faced was grey, grey and black and powder-white. The sky was bright enough, with scattered light in clouds that even Luke — raised on Tatooine — had to squint at as he tried to determine the approximate location of any sun. The great plain that stretched seemingly boundless before him was a curious reflection of the sullen grey sea into which he'd crashed: the knife-edged cliffs formed a complete ring; the various bits of rock and boulder that lay scattered randomly across the all-but-featureless cauldron floor were much like the rocks that had been drowned in the incoming tide.

And there was the ash.

Like water, like waves, it drifted over everything: pervasive, omnipresent, of such a uniform grey that — between the brightness of the heavily overcast sky and the neutrality of the ash — Luke felt his head swim. The greys of the ash and the sky joined each other; the difference between the two became almost impossible to

isolate. In the featureless grey of ash and cloud, the rocks — the only defined objects in this landscape — seemed to move before his stunned and confused eyes. Luke almost thought the ring of cliffs that surrounded the cauldron rotated up in front of him, seeking to enclose him; he almost thought the jagged rock leapt from its ashen bed to fly at him. Then he shook himself, and faced merely the rock and the ash once more.

There had once been a natural catastrophe here; and from the sharpness of the rock that had survived what Luke assumed had been a melting of the rock into a lake of now-cooled slag, he felt it had not been so long ago. It was still, oppressively still, and hot, and Luke could not tell whether the heat was being generated by the louring sky or the living and still-angry rock. The ashfall — Luke kicked some up with his foot, and watched it settle into a soft dusty pyramid cone — had softened the outlines of the destruction, but what destruction had been there, Luke sensed, had been massive. Nothing lived, nothing moved in all the great plain's cauldron.

Except...

There was one site, not central to the cauldron but off to one side a bit, one site not entirely of black rock. Luke, squinting as he was, thought he could make out tumbled pillars with jagged edges of metal that had been wrought by a sentient power. He pondered on the possible significance of that place while something drew his eye to one particular spot where the dust that covered most of everything yet failed to disguise the distinctive profile of an elite-class TIE fighter half-hidden amid the ruins.

A small breeze came up, and Luke could see small drifts of dust being raised to lie yet more deeply against all that was upon the plain. The breeze stirred the cape of one who stood patiently waiting; the dust whitened the greaves of the glistening black body-armor. The figure on the plain was surely as aware of Luke as Luke was of him; and Luke, after only a moment's hesitation, began to climb down into the cauldron to face Lord Vader where he stood.

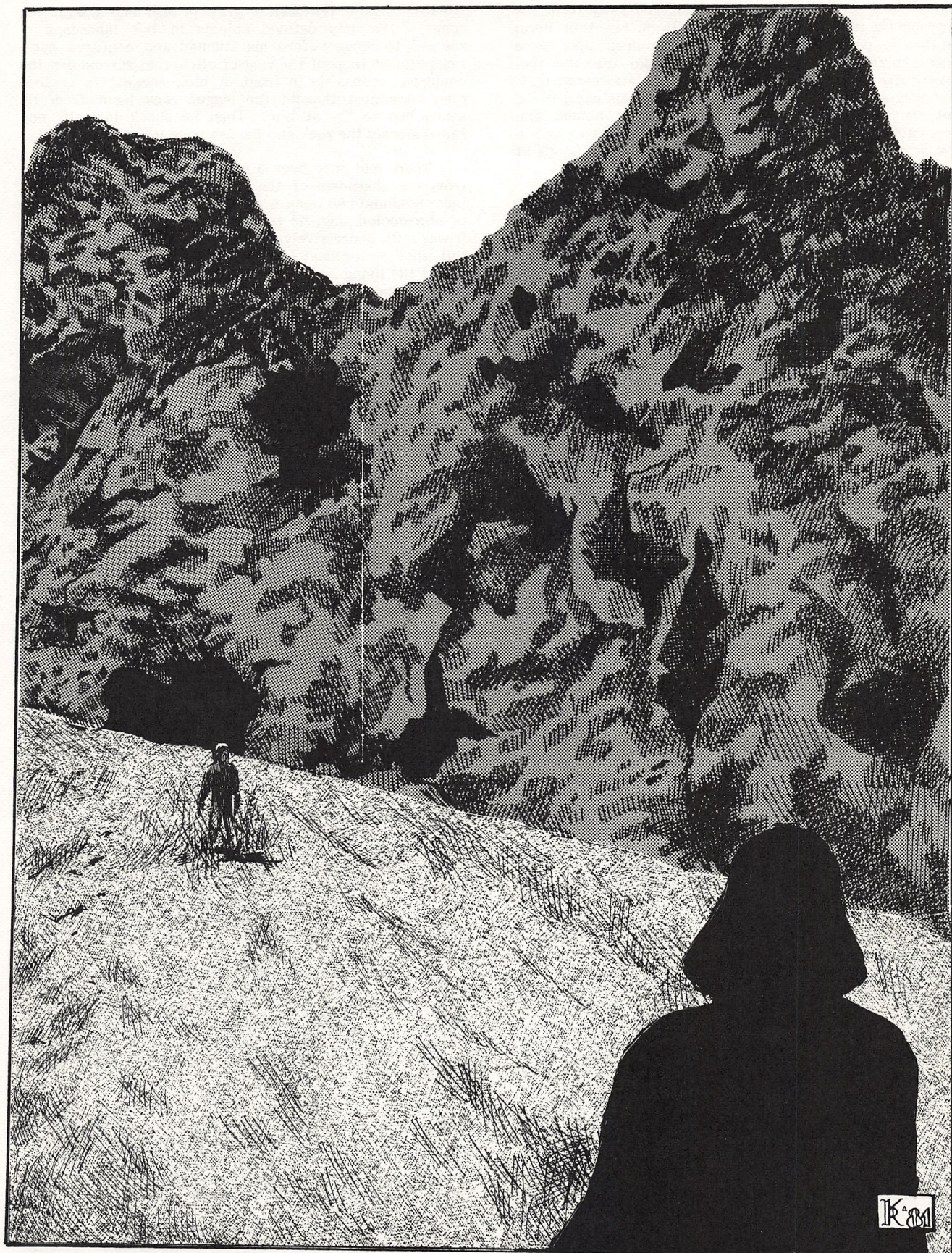


Lord Vader had not realized that Skywalker was this close to his goal. The implications were ominous. It was bad enough that Skywalker had evaded him, resisted him. Bad enough that the boy had obviously grown as a Jedi between Vader's first meeting with him and this one — else the boy would never, could never have come to Dagobah, whose wild places were powerful enough to be proof against any but Jedi.

None that lived had been here since he and Obi-wan had first fought, since what had once been a thriving community had been drowned in a lake of fire. Vader had escaped the holocaust, dragging his badly damaged flesh away to his vessel by main force of will as the hot ash seared his body to the bone and the acid rain ate his features away.

And now he stood again where he had never thought to stand; here, where he had sealed the irrevocability of his dark side choice in saber-duel against his self-same teacher. Skywalker was here, he had known it when he came; it was Skywalker's presence that had brought him. Skywalker's trace had led him back to Dagobah.

Skywalker's appearance had indeed solved an old question in Vader's mind: Obi-wan must have fled through



the same tunnel that Skywalker had come out of. But, again, that very fact was worrisome. If Skywalker had retraced Obi-wan's footsteps, he had passed through the psychic horrors that Obi-wan had fled with, and that could only mean that Luke Skywalker had weathered those horrors. How could he, so young, have borne so much? Was it possible he had learned from more than Obi-wan?

Vader sent within the Force to gauge Skywalker's progress, but his probe was blocked, almost casually, by a solid wall of silver-white from Skywalker. Vader knew deeper concern than ever before. Concern, even fear. There were many of the old Masters who had never been located, not even by the Emperor, though they were powerless now to work against the dark side except in small ways, rendered so by Vader's stern vendetta against the younger generations of Force-masters. Could it be Luke Skywalker had had instruction and guidance from Vader's own masters? If so — no, it was impossible. No child of the Tatooine desert, not even a child of Skywalker's with Obi-wan's guidance, could match Darth Vader. Vader was a servant of the dark side, a Dark Lord indeed of the Sith. And his power was stronger. Skywalker would come to him, was already halfway across the long dusty approach from the tunnel to where Vader stood in the ruins of the council refectory. And as Vader had vowed to his Master, Luke Skywalker would join them or die.



The powdery ash kicked up with his every step, the clouds exploding shoulder high and hanging in the now-still air. Luke walked desert-still, desert-lightly, knowing that if he were to move like a city-dweller, the dust would choke him, blind him. He knotted the scarf around his neck, over his nose and mouth, automatically. The thought intruded itself irrelevantly: he might as well have been back on Tatooine, where the suns of ages had baked the dust to just such a fine and motile power. When he stood a distance of five paces from the Dark Lord, Luke stopped, and the ash billowed around him like the heavy mists of the base on Yavin Four. Luke stopped, and looked upon his enemy; Luke waited.

"My son," Lord Vader said. Luke shook his head gently in negation. He felt no conviction whatever in Vader's words, no truth, only a hope. If he were to follow Vader's way, Luke knew he could become like a true son, an heir to Vader's power. Luke also knew he would not follow.

"No, Lord Vader," Luke replied, and sensed the Dark Lord's faint surprise at Luke's own new-found convictions. "I am no son of yours." He felt as if he almost knew Lord Vader's thoughts, even through the dissimulation which the skill of years and the dark side of the Force had armed his adversary with.

"You are my son. Come with me now, Luke. You must know that what I told you is the truth: we will destroy the Emperor. It is your destiny."

"I will destroy the Emperor," Luke said; and wondered at his own certainty, the absolute certainty, of his claim. "It is my destiny. I will not join with you, Darth Vader."

"You are still young, unpracticed in the ways of the Force. I have seen the future. I tell you now that if you will not be guided by me, you — and all of those you love most — must die, and die horribly."

"The future is clouded with emotion," Luke answered. It seemed to mean more than the meaning of the words themselves should have, for Vader no sooner heard than he took up his weapon, and Luke saw the dust stirred by even so small a movement as the crimson glow of Vader's lightsaber that had taken Ben from him.

"Then you must prepare to die," Vader told him; and leapt forward without warning to shear Luke into oblivion.

The move had not been anticipated. Luke was startled both by the suddenness and the ferocity of Vader's assault. Some part of his mind remained startled at his own response as well: Luke moved almost without conscious volition to one side as Vader lunged. The saber — Luke could see the saber's halo, even through the thick churning of dust the feint had raised — missed Luke by a respectable margin, and he stood facing Vader once again.

He didn't quite know where Vader was, apart from the saber's glow through the clouds of ash. There was no seeing Vader's dark armor, but then it was probably grey with ash now, even as Luke's own clothing was. The ash clung to fabric and skin alike. With the habit of years, Luke blew through the cloth that covered his nose and mouth, clearing his makeshift filter. He was grey from head to foot, but his eyes, accustomed to such dust storms, wept fluid enough to keep his vision clear. Luke sensed a new attack, and, eyes tightly shut, dropped to the ground, rolling several times in the feather-soft ash. When he stood once more he could no longer even see the saber — but he knew Vader was still there, still looking to kill him.

It did not occur to Luke to draw either the knife or the blaster he was armed with; so unreal, so ephemeral were weapons of that sort in the Force. He simply stood, and waited. What he was waiting for — beyond further attack — he did not know; he didn't stop to think about it, to worry about how he would survive this unequal contest.

Luke heard the whining of Vader's respirator, more shrill in action than when Vader was at rest; and again Luke yielded before the furious attack that threatened him through the ash that concealed everything from sight.

Luke's normal time-sense seemed suspended; everything was happening in slow motion. He seemed to sense Vader's every action hours before it threatened him; Lord Vader seemed to move as slowly as an ancient heavy transport.

There was no fear left in Luke; he had left it all in the cave tunnel. There was no anger: not for his father's murder; not for Ben's murder; not even for the destruction of the Lars' homestead and the torture, the murder of his foster parents, or the torture of his friends. There was only an odd detachment, a feeling of weightless mind in his suddenly weightless flesh. It seemed he eluded Vader time and time again as a bit of dried sere leaf danced in a ventilator.

Once, and only once, Luke thought to take the offensive, to attack, to kill Lord Vader and take his transport. He began to reach for his blaster — the motion still more in mind than actual — and found himself so slowed, so vulnerable in that position that Vader came perilously close to severing Luke's life from his body. No, he told himself sternly. You are not to destroy Lord Vader. The statement brought immediate serenity, immediate clarification; Luke, firmly centered once more, moved quickly at the last fraction of a second, and Vader

actually fell over Luke as Luke rolled to escape.

The dust in the air by now was so thick that Luke could scarcely keep his breath-cloth clean. It was dangerous, he knew, this constant pausing to shake it out, holding his breath till the cloth was in place again; but it was more dangerous to him — especially now — to let his air passages fill up, clog with ash, cripple him with coughing.

Luke found his feet again, cleared the rag he was breathing through. Strangely light, strangely weightless as he felt, Luke was beginning to tire— Luke heard the explosion.

It was a small sort of explosion, but it sent the ash flying. Luke could place its source at his last approximate location for Darth Vader. He stood quite still, puzzled, letting the tears clear his vision; he felt no threat, no danger in standing still. There had been an explosion over there — but he didn't hear anything now, except some sort of a strange scuffling. He couldn't even hear the increasingly labored wheezing sound of Vader's respirator.

From the chilling of his back, Luke guessed that another small breeze had sprung up. It cooled the sweat-soaked clothing across his waist and thighs and shoulders. The clouds of ash that so completely surrounded the two of them since battle had been joined now began to clear off rapidly, carried away from Luke like the mists that vanished under the warming sun of Yavin. And what Luke saw before him when the dust began to clear brought horror and pity to him, even after all of the horrors he had sustained. Lord Vader lay shattered in the dust; the explosion Luke had heard had been the regulatory mechanisms built into the Sith lord's battle-armor.

In that first moment of realization Luke saw that most of the fleshy portion of his adversary's chest had been horribly torn by the equipment's explosion so near to the flesh. He averted his eyes. Not even this heavy dust was sufficient to soak up, to cover the crimson of the man's blood: the regulatory mechanisms must have been set into an integral part of Lord Vader's body armor for it had offered no protection from the blast. The Dark Lord was all but fragmented into two pieces. Luke's unwilling attention was drawn to the source of the scuffling sound he had heard: Lord Vader twisted convulsively upon the ground, his hands — the lightsaber now abandoned — working frantically, ineffectually, at his helmet. Luke stared in dreadful pity and understanding. Vader could not have been familiar with the effect of the fine ash on his mechanicals. His respirator must have filled with ash, clogged. The Dark Lord's respirator would have been geared toward protection from poisonous gases and the smoke of battle; it took a moisture farmer from Tatooine to know how fine and all-pervasive ash could interfere with and destroy the most sophisticated equipment. Especially the most sophisticated equipment. Vader's respirator had seized up; the regulators and the life-support circuits Vader had worn beneath his now-splintered rib cage had overloaded and gone critical. And now Vader fought for air, fought to remove the dread black helmet that no longer protected him from anything.

A moment only Luke stared, and then he was kneeling in the dust at Vader's head, fingers searching for the locking mechanism, desperate to free his adversary of the helmet that asphyxiated him. He found the external release, worried at it frantically. It began to yield. He

worked at it with both hands — until Luke's right hand froze, finger-crook in its turn. He could not use the cyberhand, he was as much victim now to the dust — and to the water, most likely — as Vader himself. He could not free the helmet from its locking mechanism; the mechanism was jammed and covered with ash, and, with only one hand functioning, Luke could not get the purchase he needed to force the seal. Vader's respirator, jammed; Vader's helmet-seal, jammed; Luke's cyberhand, jammed. And Vader's struggles grew ever weaker.

Luke continued to work at the external release, knowing he would not be able to break the seal in time, watching as his enemy died the twin deaths of blood loss and suffocation before his very eyes. One final convulsion, and Lord Vader's gloved hand closed fiercely on Luke's living one; and then in the blown ash and the silent cauldron, Lord Vader's life deserted the Sith lord, and the Dark Lord Vader — died.

Luke pried his hand free from Vader's dead hand somehow, and stood, stunned, to look down at the mortal image of his enemy. He sensed in some inner-sighted way that Vader was indeed dead, this time; dead, destroyed — terminated. Lord Vader's dread career of oppression and cruelty was ended. Not by force of arms, not by superior power, not by greater knowledge in the Force; Darth Vader was dead by his own hand, as surely as if he had cut his own throat. The respirator, Vader's life-support system — he had relied on those to continue his life when he should by all physical measure have been dead. The respirator had sustained Vader when the flesh had failed. The failure of the life-support system had destroyed Darth Vader utterly. It was a strange and disturbingly unsuitable end for a Jedi, a warrior; but this Jedi, this warrior had, after all, put his best talents to most perversely unsuitable use.

Luke looked down at his right hand, frozen as the fingers were unnaturally. With the fingers of the other hand, he opened the mechanism, noting where the seal was broken and the dust contamination within. If he had been whole, he surely must have freed the Dark Lord from the battle-armor's helmet; Vader might have breathed as a man once more before he died. But it was Vader's own self, and none other, who had given Luke to wear the cyborg mechanism whose failure had ultimately sealed Darth Vader's doom.

Luke turned away and scanned the cliffs. There, the water would be that way, his ship would be waiting for him. Luke set out walking in his desert fashion, slowly but steadily, across that ash-blasted cauldron. Just once he looked back: Where Vader's crumpled body lay was just a crumpled and ash-covered irregularity on the cauldron's floor.

Then Luke took himself off to scale the cliffs — a task made even more difficult when one-handed — and find R2 and his X-wing.



Between their computers, R2 and the ship had managed, by judicious use of navigation jets, to keep themselves from destruction on the rock, but there had been no sign of their master for quite some time now, and R2 — if such a thing could be said of a droid — was becoming discouraged.

They were in no immediate danger: the tide was out, and would not float them free from the layers of sand

they were presently buried for some little while. Artoo was busily calculating power reserves: through how many more tides could they remain undamaged without their master's assistance? Thus abstracted — if a droid may be said to be abstracted — R2 did not scan for life-forms till a familiar one was quite near.

When R2 perceived that Luke Skywalker was approaching from the black cliffs, it thrilled the welcome news to the X-wing, and rocked madly in curiosity and a certain — if it is the correct word when speaking of droids — frustration. Where was counterpart C-3PO when R2 really needed him? Luke Skywalker didn't answer the first of the stubby droid's questions, didn't begin to apologize for exposing R2 and the ship to such dangers of destruction. No, Luke Skywalker responded inappropriately, as he he 'thought' — R2 was not quite confident what was entailed in 'thinking' for non-mechanicals — R2 was expressing mere relief at Luke's survival, and pleasure in seeing him alive. Artoo would have to discuss this with 3PO...when it was next with 3PO. In the meantime, their master had extended a problem: a failed mechanism in one of his appendages. If R2 could have sighed and grumbled, it doubtless would have; in any event, it extended the proper probes and sensors, and went to work.



Lando didn't know whether to be concerned for Han or not. Was the Corellian's constant introspection just one of those moods that fell on him periodically? Lando had known Han to indulge in a deep purple funk for sometimes as long as two days. But it had been different from this — this abstracted musing. He found Han sitting near an open panel with a tool in his hands, dreaming off into mid-air.

"Han, not even the Falcon can repair herself without some kind of help. Now, are you going to use that tool or pray over it?"

"Hmmm?"

"Han. Han, it's me, Lando. Remember me? I'm the man you cheated out of this bird, remember?" The unfair allegation was all but guaranteed to get a rise out of the normally contentious Corellian; but not this time. Han just smiled genially.

"Aw, Lando. It ain't that way at all. What's on your mind?"

"Han, you've been behaving very strangely since we got you out of that box. Space-happy, almost."

"Well," Han smiled sleepily again, "I guess spending — how long was it? — in a box'd do that to anybody's sanity. You know the princess? Leia?"

"Sure, Han. Lovely lady, lovely." Lando was a little taken aback at the apparent change of subject. "You two have an understanding, don't you? She's very anxious to have you back. You're a lucky man, Han. I always said you were lucky."

"You always said I was too lucky for my own good." Han shook his head in decisive negation, still smiling. "No. No, not really. 'Course she thinks she is. In love, I mean. —We do. Sort of."

"C'mon, Han. There's gotta be more to it than that.

You two together, you're—"

"Not in the cards, brother." Han stood up, and crossed the small work-space to raise his hands to an overhead conduit and half-lean against it, half-swing from it. "Hey, Lando, did you ever pull such a swift one, such a good con, that you conned yourself too? Hmmm?"

"You bet I have," Lando could respond at once, without hesitation. "Bespin, for one. It just makes me so mad—"

"We'll go back to Bespin," Han told him. "We'll go back, and we'll get you back your city, friend. Should be a good fight. What do you think?"

"I don't think that fine lady is going to want to let you go, Han. And I don't think you ought to leave her."

"No problem." Han was still smiling, but Lando had never seen quite that expression of rueful pain on Han's face. "She'll let me go. Lando, my friend, I conned myself into a good one, this time."

"You talking about Leia, Han?" Lando felt he had to ask, just to make sure.

"Started as almost a joke," Han said. Lando got the feeling that Han wasn't really listening to him, or answering the question. Han seemed to be talking to himself. "Kind of just teasing Luke. But then— well, she's a special kind of lady, brother. And it got to where maybe I wasn't watching my step, like I should have been doing."

Lando could hardly believe it was Han Solo talking. This private, nearly self-mocking introspection was so different from Han's public persona. Lando would have been embarrassed 'eavesdropping' on such a personal conversation, except it seemed so obvious to Lando that Han really didn't care who knew his guilty secrets.

"—and I fell in love with her. Leia." Han spoke the name as if it were passing sweet on his tongue, with such an honesty of love and loss that Lando felt a pain within him, and averted his eyes. "Leia. And I did a good job of pretending it could last, between Hoth and Bespin. But even I know it just ain't planned, brother. I'm no good for her — except for comfort when she needed it, and comic relief. It's gotta be Luke. For Leia's sake, it's got to be Luke."

"Don't sell yourself short now, Han," Lando warned cautiously. From what Han was saying he'd been doing some fairly heavy thinking, and Lando was concerned.

"C'mon. Can you see me giving a woman like that the support she needs? I'm ten years older than she is, Lando; I'll be dead before she hits the best years, even if I am lucky enough to live to old age. Hey, I got to be her first true love, and that's worth a lot, ain't it? But people's first loves are supposed to fade out of the picture, Lando, so's they can use what they've learned about it to choose their proper partners. So you and me, we sort of fade out of the picture. We go to Bespin. With any kind of luck," Han added, pausing on the way out to take Lando's shoulders and fix Lando's eyes with his, "I'll get myself killed. That's a good way for a first true love to go, I think."

"Chewbacca isn't going to let you get away with that!" Lando yelled after him, but Han was gone.

Luke lay back in his position in the X-wing's cockpit — as much as he could lay back, being strapped in — and composed his thoughts. He felt so drained, so weak. There had been times he had thought he would never gain the top of the great cliff wall, never win over even the fairly easy kilometers of the plateau between the volcano's cauldron and the water. Certainly he had almost despaired of climbing down the cliffs to the beach. It had seemed impossible, weakened as he was in spirit and flesh alike, that he would ever reach his waiting X-wing safely — and yet he had, though the dreamlike state Luke had fallen into since his adversary had lost now muffled and diminished Luke's wonder at that fact.

Only after he was safely spaced for the Ocor Deuce base that R2 had logged in, his hand at least functional again, did it begin to really soak in. Vader was dead. And he, Luke, was a Jedi. Somehow Luke felt it was critically important that he had not raised his hand against his 'father'; that he, Luke, had not, in his first exercise of that deeper power he was beginning to tap, used that Force to kill even one whom Luke felt so strongly needed killing. He had not killed Lord Vader; Darth Vader's evil, Darth Vader's willful arrogance — his attempts to impose himself upon the cosmos by manipulation — had been more than sufficient to complete the job of self-destruction that Vader had commenced when he had chosen might over right.

Luke knew it would take more than the journey from Dagobah — had he really been back to Dagobah? — for him to begin to understand, to assimilate what had happened to him, what he had learned. For now it was enough to know that he had faced Lord Vader, and he had not lost. He had found that knowledge of one-ness with the Force that Master Yoda had tried to express; and he knew himself for a Jedi now, the Force as near and present and deployable as his own mind, his ship, his weapons.



"Are you quite certain?" Leia asked the intelligence officer, not so much to check the information — she knew well enough that Envic had never offered her faulty information — but to have the pleasing words repeated once more. Envic seemed to understand, nodded her great feathered head reassuringly. "The information is reliable to within the requisite degree of five, Princess. Darth Vader has abandoned the fleet, unescorted, in a modified TIE. He eluded our fighters, but they were able to track him long enough to triangulate his course: he appeared to be heading for the Asokasu sector.

"Asokasu? What's in Asokasu?" the princess asked, digesting the welcome news.

"Not much of anything, Princess. Minor settlements, some smugglers; mostly undeveloped worlds. Lankha, Dekhann, Vishnaya, Gangas, Dagobah, Gunarat—"

"What is it, Threepio?"

"Begging your pardon, Mistress Envic, did you say the Dagobah system. Artoo said that that was where Master Luke was returning to complete his training as a Jedi Knight."

"You're right, Threepio. I hadn't thought of that."

"Should we send ahead, Princess; try to warn him?"

"Wouldn't do us any good. We don't know where on Dagobah Luke is. We'll just have to hope Darth Vader doesn't know, either. Though the fact he left alone isn't very reassuring."

"Indeed, Princess. It would seem to indicate that Lord Vader anticipates no difficulty in accomplishing whatever it is he has gone to Dagobah for."

"Hmmm. He's been gone two standards now, you say? How about the maneuvers of the fleet?"

"Even as you suggested. The fleet has begun flanking movement along the near front flank."

The princess smiled with grim satisfaction. "We can implement Contingency Five, then. We ought to take at least a tenth of the fleet; we'll be leading them toward the trap Raphael Semmes has set up."

"Our flanking attacks — do we discontinue them, then?"

"Oh, no," Leia replied happily. "Oh, no, indeed not. We increase them. We yield only along their forward edge of advance. They've made up their minds, now, as to our location, and we can hit from home as hard as we like — they'll take it as a clumsy diversionary measure. Schedule me for a briefing at 2000, please, Envic. I'll want to talk to the pilots."



Luke dropped hyper for the Chela system and found himself, without warning, in the middle of a firefight. The squadron seemed aware of his presence almost before Luke realized what was going on; one of the newer fighters — Antidic — hailed him immediately.

"Commander Skywalker! Nice you could make it, sir!"

Luke blushed in the privacy of his X-wing even as he fired on one of the TIEs to draw it off one of the squadron's ships — GD One, Luke thought.

"Sir." Antidic was at least seven years older than Luke, and it made Luke uncomfortable to be called 'sir' anyway.

"Thanks, GD Eight," Luke called back. "Where did these bugs come from, anyway?" It didn't seem as if the squadron had been in too much trouble before Luke's unexpected appearance; now the odds were decisively on the side of the Alliance, and already one of the four flights of TIEs had apparently decided to cut their losses and run.

"Friendly local Imperial Star Fleet," came the cheerful reply. "Delaying action, on their way out. Seems as if—" GD Eight made a kill, and Antidic paused to shout his pleasure before picking up the interrupted explanation. "Didn't like our local cuisine, decided to go home. We're delaying as many of 'em as we can — permanently. There's two! Yay!" Luke had to laugh, and shake his head at GD Eight's exuberance. But there wasn't any fight left anymore; and so, with Luke in the middle, trying to answer everybody's questions at once, the squadron regrouped for the rebel base, and 'home'.



They found that Luke was not the only wanderer come to roost — for when the squadron settled into their bay, the news was all over the base that the Millennium Falcon was back. The exclaiming over Luke, the greetings and the questions, were somewhat diluted by the 'coincidence'. Luke was more glad of that than otherwise. He climbed down out of his 'wing, conscious now of his dusty disreputable appearance; he'd have to wash and change. He was looking forward to it. But it would wait till after he saw Han, saw Leia—

He waited while the tech droid dismounted R2; then, together, they went off across the spidery catwalks that spanned the massive cavern at the base's upper level, toward the bay where the Millennium Falcon was berthed.

Luke hadn't ever been in this place, nor R2 as far as Luke knew; but Luke felt no need to ask for directions, hardly hesitating from foot-span to foot-span. He knew where the Falcon was. And he got there just after Leia did, coming in behind her, so that she did not see him.

The Falcon had evidently just now limped in; the ship was still closed up tight. As Luke watched, — standing well back from Leia, not wanting to complicate her anticipation by presenting himself before she had seen Han — the passenger ramp lowered slowly to the ground.

The first one down the ramp was Chewbacca, furry feet and all. Luke thought the Wookiee looked very pleased with himself as he angled his auburn head back up under the Falcon's belly. //Han! Welcoming committee! Mateworthy!// Espying 3PO, Artoo separated from Luke. The young rebel was alone to watch this reunion with inner as well as outer eyes.

The next feet down the passenger ramp came slowly, almost haltingly. It didn't seem to Luke that he had ever seen Han Solo place his feet so cautiously. Gradually the man was revealed, tucking his shirt into his belt as if neatness would prepare him for whatever ordeal he anticipated. He looked suspicious, wary, even perhaps a little frightened. Luke seemed to see Han's face as a study of uncertainty, confusion.

Han came to the bottom of the ramp, ducked his head out from under the Falcon's underside to stand rather near Chewbacca and stare wordlessly at the people gathered there to meet him, welcome him back.

Leia broke the gathering tension of the moment, abandoning all her regal dignity just this once in order to soothe the woman that was princess and Senator — but who was also a human being, with human needs. She sprinted across the floor, it was only a short distance to where Han stood; she stopped short half-a-pace in front of him, looked up into Han's face. It was furrowed with anxiety and trepidation. She threw her arms about him and hugged him fiercely. Luke saw Han's face as he moved to close his arms around Leia; saw Han's face raised to the cavern-roof, clear, washed clean of fear and anxiety and uncertainty; watched Han's face fill with love and awful tenderness as Han bent his head and kissed the princess' dark glossy hair before he turned his head to rest his cheek against her forehead.

Luke knew he could not watch this any longer and not become bitter, resentful. Han was his friend, and the couple were so true, so complete together; the last thing Luke wanted to do was let even unspoken jealousy creep into that one perfect moment. And so Luke left, quietly, hoping no one would notice. Leia was in Han's arms as if

she belonged there; and as for Han — he held her to him as if her presence, her mere existence, was sufficient to heal some terrible aching wound within him. Luke had not thought it was that way between Han and Leia. Perhaps, he thought, he had been blinded by his own love for her — for both of them. And now, to have come from his self-victory on Dagobah to jealousy and bitterness first thing? Luke wanted, Luke felt he desperately needed, some time to set his heart in order.

He found one span-bridge he felt was little used and crossed the abyss to the other side. He walked through the limestone halls of one of the storage areas, and visions filled his mind once more — visions that brought a pain, a grief as great as the horrors of the tunnel.

Han and Leia. Leia and Han. He saw scenes he realized had already taken place, the growth of loving relations between them. He saw Han sitting at Leia's feet with his back to her knees, leaning his head back into her lap to be kissed. He saw the moments of intimacy, the little gestures of affection so much more telling than kisses; he saw Leia, her eyes luminous with love and tears, looking up at Han with her palms flattened over her swollen belly; and how Han took her carefully, chastely, into his arms to comfort her. He saw Leia in a dark gown with her hair down, laughing with Han and the baby in her arms; saw Han take the baby to crook it in his arm, exclaiming, contesting with the baby for the ownership of some of his fingers. Han's child. Leia's child. Han and Leia's child. And then he saw Han lying on his back on a high narrow table, saw a hand draw the sheet up over Han's dead face, Leia looking on. Then, and only then, could Luke see himself with Leia; it was to him that she turned then for comfort, only when Han was no longer there to comfort her.

The vision stopped, Luke saw no more. He stood quite still, by himself in the corridor, much moved, much troubled by his vision. No. It couldn't be like that. Didn't he love Leia better than Han could? He couldn't let this happen, couldn't let...

And suddenly in his mind was the knowledge that he could prevent it, he could have Leia for his partner. It would not mean any actual removal, nothing so crude as killing Han — or causing Han to die. No, he could arrange it, use his new knowledge of the Force to disturb the still uncertain terms of Leia and Han's understanding, to cripple their faith and trust in one another, to afflict their affection just enough that they would break their inconvenient alliance. Luke would be the natural one for Leia to look to for support; and he could still have Han as a friend.

But almost before he had started along this line of reasoning, Luke sensed it was not satisfactory. For one, he did not want to 'have' Leia. He knew he couldn't 'have' Leia, not in that sense. She would come to him, or she would not. It was not a question of possessing her as if she were a droid. It was a question of partnership; and if she had judged and rejected him as a life-partner, it didn't matter how many Hans there were to distract her. Perhaps he could force her choice — all right, he admitted to himself, he knew he could force her choice now, and there would be no visible sign or hint of coercion. But as surely as it was within his power to end her will, in time surely she would know — even if she could make no outward protest. Wrong, it was all wrong. Not only would such an attempt be doomed to failure, it would be in complete opposition to master Yoda's teachings, to Luke's own convictions. What had

Leia herself said to Luke about Han? "He's got to go his own way; no one can choose it for him." Any temptation — not temptation in itself, but any serious attempt — to move another being down a path of Luke's choosing would be wrongful manipulation. And a trap, perhaps, set by the dark side of the Force, to tempt him into Vader's errors even in the so-recent aftermath of his victory against Vader.

Luke sighed heavily. This might turn out to be more difficult than he had thought. It would certainly be difficult if he were to watch, throughout the years, his older, more dashing, more worldly-wise, more confident friend share everything that Luke had dreamed of sharing with the person Luke had fallen in love with. Difficult? It would present many trials to his integrity in the Force at first, he was sure; but he would weather the trials. He would rejoice in whatever happiness Han and Leia managed to find together. He would not yield to the dark side of the Force.

Luke turned back to the busier portions of the base. He had important news to bring: the fact that Lord Vader was dead. Leia would want to embrace him, too. But that pleasing prospect could no longer quicken his step with eagerness; she had made her choice.

She had chosen Han.



In the first confusion of relief and love and anxiety that had sent her flying to Han's embrace, Leia was conscious of nothing more than the soothing completeness she felt in his arms, the healing comfort of his physical presence easing her of anxiety as she hugged him to her fiercely, possessively, and felt his head rest against her own. And in the few days following, the soothing calm his mere presence could give her had not fallen prey to her second thoughts and her relentless, her merciless self-examinations.

She loved him, she knew it; but did she love him truly? Their bond had been forged by danger, desperate circumstances, unnatural stress, unnatural vulnerability. Now that the pressure was off — now what? Leia wanted to go talk to Luke about it, but she stifled that impulse in a turmoil of self-destructive thoughts. You told Han that you loved him, she reminded herself, not for the first time. And he let you see that he loves you. Now you want to take back your words; you want to betray Han, laugh at his feelings?

Leia Organa felt trapped. Trapped, desperate, and entirely contemptible. It had been true when she'd said it — her love her been real, and perfect, untainted by this cowardly vacillation. Trapped by her word, by her knowledge of her lover, and forced — was she to be forced to stand by and watch Luke...

Entirely contemptible, she told herself. You are entirely contemptible. Han Solo is a partner in all things that many women might desire — do desire. And you no sooner win him over to come back to you than you start to wish you could change your mind.

It was a horrible situation. She wished she had someone to talk to, but the only person she felt she could have discussed this with was Han. Or Luke. How could she take Han's love, his trust, the honest devotion of this honest man, and twist the power he had given her to hurt him like a knife in his back — stabbing him from behind

even as she embraced him? He had been betrayed before, she felt she knew what an effort it had been for him to freely give her power to betray him once again.

She stood by herself in a conference room, full of this bitter paradigm, and did not hear Han come in. She started violently when he touched her.

"Gotta be going, Leia," he said, and kissed her forehead.

For all her uncertainty, the distress of her reaction was honest and unfeigned.

"Going? Why? Han, don't—"

"Gotta be going, Leia." He released her, and stood off from her. She looked at him, immobile with confusion; she could not read his face.

"Han, I don't see why you should go away. It's only been a few days—"

"Well, I figure it's been longer than that, Leia." He sat down, folded his arms in front of him, looked her frankly in the eye. "I figure it started the minute I met you. It's been long enough, Leia. Long enough to know each other — and love each other — and now...."

She felt paralyzed with shock. Was he saying what she thought he was saying? He stood and crossed the room to put his hands to her shoulders, as if he read, was responding to, the trouble of her mind.

"And now, Leia, if I don't go away and put some space between us, it's all going to come out wrong. It's over, Leia; you know it is. I want to keep the history as clean as I can."

"But — I told you—"

"Feelings are like five-credit chits, Princess; you can get change anywhere, anytime. The words don't mean any less if you change your mind."

"I'm so ashamed!" Leia startled herself with the suddenness, the violence of her cry. But Han simply folded her to him and rocked her gently in his arms.

"It's not the end of the world, Leia. I'm not ashamed of you. And I don't want to see you throw your life away because you're too proud to change your mind. And I'm not going to let you do that to yourself, d'you hear me? So I'm going. Lando and me, we've planned ourselves a good little fight—"

He rambled on, softly, and Leia wept as she could hardly remember ever weeping.

"C'mon, little Leia, sweet, little Leia. Ain't nothing that lives in all the thousand worlds that never changed its mind."



Han Solo looked much better now, looked like his old self again. Luke knew that Han would be leaving soon, very soon, for Lando Calrissian had convinced the rebel leaders that Bespin had to be liberated; and Han — Han, and Chewbacca, and the Millennium Falcon — was leaving with Lando and his borrowed fighters to take Lando's city back from the Empire. But why Han had come

hunting him up at this late hour Luke wasn't quite sure.

Luke had been working on his X-wing, and now as Han — having called Luke's name out with boisterous camaraderie from across the bay — came within normal speaking distance, Luke waved the tollywocket at him in greeting. "Hey yourself, Han. What's the matter?"

"You and me, kid, we gotta talk. Hey, what do you think you're doing to that poor defenseless — oh, is that it? Okay. Well — come on, Luke, for cryin' out loud, sidown."

Luke didn't feel as if he was anywhere near enough to a sufficient control of his present feelings of resentment and hostility to want to talk, to be able to talk, at length with Han. But he sat down. He had to keep on trying; and Luke knew that even with the sometimes quite fierce resentment, the sometimes almost savage hostility that he had felt toward Han in the past few days, he did like Han, and his basic affection for his friend was trying hard to surface through the interference of Luke's disappointments in love. "Okay, Han. What — ah — what do you want to talk about?" The phrase suddenly reminded Luke of his Aunt Beru, and the idea of being motherly with Han was incongruous enough to ease a great deal of the tension Luke felt. Unfortunately, Han's next words restored a major portion of Luke's discomfort.

"Talk about the princess. What's the matter with you, anyway? You mad at her or something?"

Luke couldn't think how to answer this, but Han didn't wait for a reply. "You're not being very nice to Leia, Luke."

"I don't need to be nice to Leia. You're being nice for both of us."

Han nodded in knowing satisfaction, and turned slightly to sit on a piece of equipment and lean his back against one of the landing struts of Luke's X-wing. "Yeah, I figured that was the problem. Look, kid, it ain't what you think at all."

"Han." Luke was not going to be able to make this work if the Corellian was going to try to play games with him. "I know that she loves you, Han; I know that you love each other. I'm trying to be happy for you. Don't say stupid things." He thought Han looked a little surprised; perhaps he'd been a bit too blunt.

"Oh, this is more complicated than I thought. Are you listening to me, Luke?"

"I'm listening." Luke knew he sounded impatient, but the question made him feel as if Han intended to play Uncle Owen with him.

"Look, this may take some time. I have to make sure, that's all. Didn't I tell you it ain't what you think it is?"

"You told me, yes."

"So tell me why you been treating her so unkind."

"Han, I don't know what you're talking about."

"I think you do." Han grinned. "And I'm bigger than you are, Luke." Even as Han made the threat, Luke sensed and responded to its two levels. On the face of it,

Han was making a joke, a mock-threat intended to ease the tension in the air between them. And Han was also making a very real statement of intent: Han apparently meant to see that Luke amended his behavior, one way or the other. "You haven't said three words to her since you got back. If I didn't know you better, I'd have to say you've been very rude to her. Now explain to me why you should turn your back on her like that. You were ready enough to keep her company before."

"Yes, before," Luke shot the word back at Han angrily. "Before you got so cozy with her, Han. You think I'd enjoy following her around, and her with eyes only for you? Come on, Han. I may be just a baby by your lights, but I know enough to keep my back to the wind."

"You know, Luke, if you could just once forget some of these romantic ideas of yours an' listen to me, this would be a lot easier. I'm trying to talk to you; I'm trying to tell you that Leia..." Han, Luke saw, had let his impatience get the better of him; and evidently judged it expedient to stop in mid-sentence. After a moment, when Han did not continue, Luke completed Han's sentence for him, his words gentle in his affection for his friend, even with the bitterness of their import:

"Leia loves you, Han. I've seen it. You're going to be very happy together."

Han stared at Luke, chewing on his underlip; then suddenly he jumped to his feet, and began to pace with his fingers flattened in to his back pocket. "No, we're not. It doesn't work that way, Luke, not this time."

"What do you mean? You know she loves you—"

Han nodded, slowly; almost — it seemed to Luke — sadly.

"Yeah. Yes, Leia's loved me, truly and honestly. You don't know what kind of a gift the love of a woman like Leia is, Luke. But it's changed now, we both know it."

"Aw, you're just not making any sense."

Han ruffled his fingers through his hair as if his head hurt him, and sat down again. "Do you know that love is something you have to learn to do? Now, I'm not talking about the mechanics of it, you should know better than that. Corellians are born lovers. No, a person has to learn to love, just the same as flying a ship—"

"And you and Leia are learning, together. Isn't that the way it's supposed to be?" Luke sensed a great emptiness, a sorrow no less piercing for its being temporary. Luke could lose his bitterness, his sorrow, in concern for his friend, Han.

"That isn't exactly the way it happens, Luke. You gotta understand: I don't think either of us really knew what we were getting into, at first. We're just so much alike; we do understand each other. And then, well, we kind of got ahead of ourselves."

"Han, you know she loves you."

"And she said so, too. And she meant it when she said it. Luke, she and I aren't any kind of forever-and-ever. Now she's changed, and she needs you a damn sight more'n she needs me, and I'm leaving with Lando for Bespin, and that's all I came to say!"

These last words were practically shouted, and as Han forced the last few out, he jumped to his feet again and strode off. Luke couldn't quite tell if it were anger, chagrin, hurt, or any combination that had put such an edge in Han's voice. Luke felt, however, that he couldn't let Han storm off like that, not now; there were too many questions raised by Han's inexplicable behavior. Luke ran to catch up with Han, stopped him with his hands on Han's upper arms. "Hey, wait! You can't mean — you and Leia, you've been doing so well together!"

The look of Han's face was almost ugly now with the turbulent passion Luke sensed Han fighting to control. "Let me tell you something, boy!" Han snarled, his accusatory finger stabbing the air just short of Luke's nose. "She was just practicing. Learning how to do it. Practicing for you, Luke." Han must have responded to the shock Luke knew showed on his face at that unflattering observation, for his eyes fell almost at once; and when he looked at Luke again — Luke having released his hold on Han in his distress at the Corellian's words — Han's face was calmer, his voice quiet. "I'm not trying to say she was lying to me Luke; no, never. Leia's an honest woman. Even when it hurts. Maybe I should have seen she was sort of falling too far too fast; she must have needed any kind of comfort so badly — especially with Alderaan blown out of the sky. And I was what she needed to forget Alderaan, and that's fine. I got no complaints. A princess loved me, even if she is as sharp-tongued a jennywren as I never hope to meet again. But once she starts recovering from whatever it is, she starts to realize what's going on, right? And so she kind of starts waking up, or wising up, and she sees, what's been going on in her head that made it all happen, and now she feels guilty as hell. And you make things just great for her by pretending she doesn't exist anymore. Jedi are supposed to see things, aren't they? Well, why can't you see what's going on under your own nose?"

"I— I can't believe what you're saying. It's—"

"It's as true as the Falcon's my ship, Luke. She's hurting because she figures she's used me. She's hurting because you've turned away from her. That's enough, Luke. Leia isn't gonna have to hurt if I can do anything about it. 'Cause I do love her, and I don't know whether to shake your hand or break your jaw. So I'm putting some distance between us till I decide, and now do you understand?"

"I guess," Luke muttered. No, wait. This wasn't what the vision — what in the name of Uncle Owen's vaporators was going on here?

"Fine." Han seemed to be wrking at wrapping his feelings up again. "Fine. You may make it yet, kid. You coming to see us off? Leia'll be there." Han slapped Luke's shoulder in a gesture that tasted to Luke of soldierly friendship that softened into a more personal affection; and then Han was out of the docking bay, as cocky as if he hadn't just laid his heart open. Luke sat down heavily on a crate to re-assess the entire situation.

He could have sworn that Han had just told him that he and Leia hadn't forged the permanent partnership that Luke's vision had indicated only death would dissolve — unless that relationship was not the one Luke had assumed it would be. Now that was something: if his immediate reaction to that days-old vision had been of the dark side, if he had been tempted to evil or wrong-doing by it, could not the vision itself have been a part of that temptation? Had his vision itself had its origins in the Force

that had tempted Darth Vader, the dark side Vader had permitted himself to be subverted by? Luke's mind raced to re-interpret that vision with this new possibility in mind. Surely there had been nothing that could not be equally true if it were Luke who was perhaps to be the father of that baby: Leia would always love Han in a fashion, as Luke hoped Han would remain close to him; it would be the most natural thing for Leia to share her joy and misgivings in pregnancy with Han, her pride and delight as a mother with Han, her grief at Han's death with — Luke. It all fit. Could it be possible, after all? Really, truly possible?

It seemed to Luke that the solution to his trouble lifted a burden of worrisome care from between his temples all at once. He had resisted the urge to make it true, resisted the temptation to force the future into a mold of his own making; and now, here it was all coming round, the substance of Luke's dreams becoming reality. It all fit. It could be true.

There was a question still, of course: what had given rise to that great temptation? Was it, had it been, a reflection of his own weakness? The passions of selfishness and domination that only time and study could teach him to purify? Or — had there been a subtle cast, an alien flavor? Vader's Imperial master, Force-master, reaching out to do what Vader had failed to do? In either case, Luke had not given in to his own passions, had won the victory over himself. There would be time later to worry about the Emperor.

"Artoo?" Luke asked the patient astrodroid, who had been waiting — all this time — for Luke to get back to the business of pulling maintenance on the ship. "Artoo, hold down the fort, will you. I've got to go talk to — someone — about — something—"

The droid's chirrups sounded properly agreeable to Luke, but somehow he felt as if R2 was not fooled. There would be time to worry about that later, too.

Right now Luke needed to go see Leia.



Luke was not yet as blase as some of the most experienced fighters; the atmosphere of a staging area when the fighters were readying for deployment still intoxicated him. He breathed in the heat-singed odors of the hurrying droids, the older and less well-shielded 'wings. The smell of lubricant, of volatile fuel vapors rapidly dispersing, was no less exciting and exotic to him now that he could readily identify the different sources. He took a deep breath, surveyed the scene from his position near the cave mouth with utmost satisfaction. It was beautiful. Eight Y-wings, two squadrons of X-wings, doublewings, captured TIEs, an old hulk for a fire-ship, a blockade runner; the generals had limited the volunteers and the equipment to what the Alliance could afford to lose, and it made for a motley crew indeed. Beautiful. The atmosphere in the bay was thick with excitement; the ground shook underfoot with the heavy vibration of the impatient makeshift fleet. Luke almost wish he were going — it promised to be a splendid adventure.

He watched his friends as Leia came out from behind one craft and angled over in his direction with Lando Calrissian and Chewbacca to one side, Han Solo to the other. Luke felt as pleased with the world as he hadn't for a long time, and the picture Leia and her minicourt presented made him all but laugh out loud. They were all

taller than she was, all of them, and still they had to hurry to keep up with her.

"It's a good thing you'll be with Lando on the Falcon, Han," Luke called out happily, while Leia and the others were still several paces from where he stood. "Otherwise, there'd be no guarantees he wouldn't fire the Falcon — instead of the fireship hulk — just to blow up Veers' troopship Annihilator."

"He's trying to provoke you, Han," Lando pointed out.

"Aw, can it, kid," Han retorted good-naturedly. "My baby's got too much class to cozy up to a destroyer, even to blow it up. Ain't that so?" Han asked the princess, swinging her gently around on his arm so she could join Luke.

"If you think I'm going to tell Lando about that garbage stunt you pulled — you're absolutely right. First chance I get."

"And the sooner we leave, beautiful lady, the sooner we'll be back. Then I will beseech you to relate to me in depth — with details — all of the atrocities Han has been committing upon my ship."

Chewbacca made some argumentative comment in his cynical Wookiee-speech to Lando, who laughed. Han spread his hands to play peacemaker.

"All right, all right, you guys. Knock it off. Leia? We're going; we'll be back. Luke? Don't lose the war without me, okay?" He turned to walk away with Lando and Chewbacca, then turned back as Luke called after him.

"Don't worry, Han. I'll take good care of things."

"I know you will, kid."

"Han, if you don't mind?!" Lando yelled. "I've got a city to rescue, remember? And General Veers isn't going to like being stood up."

Han smiled and waved, and trotted off to join Lando and the Wookiee. Luke slid his arm around Leia's waist, and together they watched the three oddly matched running partners swagger off to disappear into the belly of the Millennium Falcon.

"What do you suppose he meant by that?" Leia asked, curiosity, amusement and affection warming her words.

"I'm not exactly sure," Luke confessed. "But I'm not going to argue with the man." He stole a quick kiss, and together they stood, side by side, to watch the fleet deploy for Bespin.

Luke, listening to the words that whispered from irrational corners of his mind, understood now the crucial difference between Ben's benediction and Dodonna's — and the significance behind some of Master Yoda's teachings. There would be much killing yet, many trials; despair and desolation. But the Alliance would triumph, and prosper, even through the dangers — the traps — their victory would set for their ideals.

They would overcome.

Because the Force would be with them always.

"...Whaddam I gonna do, now that I'm outta carbon freeze?! I'll TELL you what I'm gonna do!! First, I'm gonna get even with that Darth Vader. I been plannin' for THREE YEARS how I'll get HIM, his KIDS, and his entire family for this. . ."



SOLO

Fern Marder

The river flows,
and the fire glows,
touching heart, soul, and mind.
The ice of the night
and the blaze of the pyre;
so the stars and history wind

One star may shine brighter than before
and rule the sky;
it scars as it warms, lights all the world
then suddenly dies.

You can't accept
what is mine to give,
yet we must share one heart.
You must be free,
as I must be,
never and always apart.

You cannot stay here with me,
though my heart calls;
you must go on, find your own star,
rebuild your own halls.

You'll wander as far
as falcon's wings can soar
your journeys flow with the tide.
But reach out to me
when you're in need,
I'll be at your side.

Dm Am E Am

Dm Am E Am Fine

Dm Am E Am

Dm Am E Am 2nd time D.C. al Fine

